Moral and Philosophical Implications of Chinese Calligraphy

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Calligraphy is esteemed as an art universally. Good calligraphy adds beauty to the words and enhances the impact that the words are able to bring to their readers. In East Asian countries such as China, calligraphy is traditionally respected as one of the most highly sophisticated forms of art.

The reason that calligraphy can have such a status in China is partly due to the fact that Chinese written language is pictographic and ideographic, rather than alphabetic. In its primordial form, Chinese written language consists of images that picture their referents or directly signify what they mean. That is different from most other languages that consist of alphabetic symbols that represent sounds, which in turn are used to refer to objects. The pictorial form allows much more room for the writer to render the written words artistically. The alphabet is limited, and once you begin writing, very soon the repetitiveness of letters is obvious. The number of characters in Chinese written language is in the thousands, which provides much variation. Another important factor is the tools that Chinese later invented for writing—soft brush and absorbent rice paper. The strokes written by those tools can be thick or thin, straight or cursive, smooth or rough, the motion can be slow or quick, the ink can be dark or light, wet or dry, the paper can be more or less absorbent. In addition, the structure of the characters and the structure of the whole piece of work can be balanced or out of balance, dull or lively, redundant or succinct—all those permits the artist to fully use her own creativity. It is like dancing with the trace of the movement of artwork.

But what is more important, Chinese calligraphy is to be thought of as a moral and philosophical implication work such as religious teachings, much like those written in gothic letters and...
Chinese Calligraphy

An example of the earliest Chinese written language—bone inscription.

Deemed as an art universum, calligraphy adds beauty to the text, increases the impact that the words have to their readers. In East China, calligraphy is regarded as one of the most highly valued forms of art.

Calligraphy can have such impact due to the fact that Chinese is pictographic and alphabetic. In its primordial language, characters consist of referents or directly signifies meaning, which is different from most alphabetic symbols that in turn are used to render the written word. The Chinese character is limited, and very soon the repetitive nature of the language in the thousands of characters is in the thousands of variations. Another important factor is that Chinese later invented and absorbent rice paper where the brush can be thick or thin, smooth or rough, the ink can be dark or light, the paper can be more or less absorbent. The structure of the character is part of the whole piece of work, the balance, dull or lively circumstance permits the artist to fully use her own imagination and creativity. It is like dancing with the soft brush and ink, with the trace of the motion left on paper as a piece of artwork.

But what is more important in appreciation of Chinese calligraphy is to understand its rich moral and philosophical implications. Speaking about moral and philosophical implications, one might immediately think about the content of a calligraphy work such as moral or philosophical teachings, much like the biblical messages written in gothic letters and framed, hanging on the wall. It is true that very often Chinese calligraphers like to write moral and philosophical sayings, citations of Buddhist and Daoist scriptures or Confucian classics, but the moral and philosophical implications in Chinese calligraphy are more direct and more intrinsic. They are associated directly with images, that is, the brush strokes and the way space is used, not merely derived from the general meaning of the words. Just like one does not necessarily need to know Chinese in order to appreciate the beauty of Chinese calligraphy, one does not have to understand the meaning of the words in order to get into the moral and philosophical implications of the calligraphy.

As the modern Neo-Confucian philosopher Xu Fuguan plausibly points out, the highest aim of the Chinese aesthetic spirit and the highest aim of Chinese philosophical traditions are the same: to achieve a state of freedom in which the subject enjoys a unity with the Other and is able to move around without obstacle in his or her creative activities as a form of self expression and the expression of the embodied Dao—the Heavenly nature in human (Xu, 1966).

Confucius has a famous saying regarding arts: "you yu yi" (Analects, 7:6). Wing-Tsit Chan translates it as “Find recreation in the arts” (Chan, 31). Here the word rendered “recreation” is “you,” the same word that the Daoist Zhuangzi used in his
"Xiaoyao You," where it is typically translated as "wandering." Both translations, "recreation" and "wandering," are insufficient and can be misleading. "You" means much more than recreation or wandering. When Confucius talks about arts, he meant broadly arts and skills, including rituals, music, archery, riding, calligraphy and mathematics—the six arts that constitute the basis of his entire liberal education program. Confucius takes those six arts as means of recreation or wandering. When Confucius talks about arts, he meant broadly arts and skills, including the rules of propriety, and perfected by music. (Analects, 8:10, Chan, 33). Here music and ritual play important role in the transformation of a person. "Wandering" is a better translation for "you," yet it is still insufficient in explicating the meaning of "you." A dictionary that most of our college students nowadays rely on for precise meaning of English words defines the word "wander" to be "to move about without a fixed course, aim, or goal," "to go idly about," "to deviate," or even "to go astray morally" (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). However, in Confucianism, the word "you" means creative activity in which one is able to "follow the heart's will without overstepping or transgressing the line (moral principles)." (Analects, 2:4) This is clear from the fact that the above quoted "you yu yi" is preceded directly by "Set your will on the Way. Have a firm grasp on virtue. Rely on humanity." (Analects, 7:6) The word "you," in this context, means a state of freedom achieved by the understanding of the Dao, the determination to follow the Dao, and through a long time practice one is able to participate the Dao effortlessly and creatively. A decent handwriting, if one can write at all, is considered by the Confucians part of being a decent human being. Just like an educated person is supposed to know how to talk in a proper manner, an educated person is supposed to be able to write in a decent style. It is not only a matter of respecting what you write, whom you are writing for or writing to, and of respecting the writer—yourself, but also a matter of achieving a unity between a person and her heavenly bestowed nature, both in terms of what kind of person she should be and what kind of person she is artistically capable of being.

Similar analysis applies to Daoism as well. As pointed out by Xu Fuguan, the "Xiaoyao You" in Zhuangzi is also simultaneously a state of artistic life and a state of being one with the Dao (Xu, 1966). When Cook Ding in Chuangzi's story cut an ox, he did it with a perfect rhythm, effortlessly, as if he was dancing and celebrating. In his performance, there was no opposition between himself and the ox, and no opposition between his will and his hands (his skills). In his eyes there was no ox standing in front of him as an "other," and he was able to "go at it by the spirit" without looking with his eyes. "Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants." (Zhuangzi, 46-7) This is a good example of being one with the Dao, but not as good an example of the exertion of artistic creativity as calligraphy. Compared to calligraphy, cutting an ox is much more a matter of skill than a matter of artistic creation. Though both cutting an ox at Cook Ding's perfection and good calligraphy require being one with the Dao, the latter is more a participation with the Dao in creation, and the creation shows the artist's own cultivated nature. The aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy is indeed so sophisticated that how much it is dependant on the moral and intellectual traits of the writer. The concepts employed in calligraphy would be sufficient to include the elements of shen [spirit], jing [energy, spirit], fa [discipline], yi [intention, style], qidu [manner], etc., and many categories for it.

From this kind of understanding, Confucian scholar Zhang Huaiguan makes the point that calligraphy "is no other than the great Dao" (Li Ti Shu Lu). Confucian Zhu Changwu pointed out that calligraphy reaches its highest wonderfulness of it joins the Dao. (Xu Shu Duan) Of course Confucians, too, will have different understandings of the differences show in the great calligraphy.

For the Confucians the moral and the morally virtues are the most important. "Wandering" is also a matter of being virtuous and valiant, and the morally virtue is artistically capable of being. It

"Set your will on the Way. Have a firm grasp on virtue. Rely on humanity."
Set your will on the Way. Rely on humanity. Achieved by the determination to follow Dao effortlessly and effortlessly, if one can write at the same time practice one is Confucian part of being. Just like an educated person is supposed to be able to talk in a proper manner, to show proper respect for the spirit without looking like an "other," and to understand the Dao as an "other." The Dao is a state of artistic creativity, effortlessly celebrating. In his position between his pen and his spirit moves where it is not only a matter of what kind of person she was, and of respecting the spirit, but also a matter of achieving a position between his pen and his spirit moves where it. This is a good example of artistic creativity as well. As Confucius and Daoists cultivated nature. The latter is more a matter of skill than a matter of artistic creativity, cutting an ox, mangle's story cut an ox, rhythm, effortlessly, as if celebrating. In his position between himself and the Dao as an "other," and he moves the spirit without looking like an "other," and he moves his spirit moves where it. This is a good example of artistic creativity, cutting an ox, rhythm, effortlessly, as if celebrating. In his position between himself and the Dao as an "other," and he moves his spirit moves where it. This is a good example of artistic creativity, cutting an ox, rhythm, effortlessly, as if celebrating. In his position between himself and the Dao as an "other," and he moves his spirit moves where it. This is a good example of artistic creativity, cutting an ox, rhythm, effortlessly, as if celebrating. In his position between himself and the Dao as an "other," and he moves his spirit moves where it. This is a good example of artistic creativity, cutting an ox, rhythm, effortlessly, as if celebrating. In his position between himself and the Dao as an "other," and he moves his spirit moves where it. This is a good example of artistic creativity, cutting an ox, rhythm, effortlessly, as if celebrating. In his position between himself and the Dao as an "other," and he moves his spirit moves where it. This is a good example of artistic creativity, cutting an ox, rhythm, effortlessly, as if celebrating. In his position between himself and the Dao as an "other," and he moves his spirit moves where it.

It includes qing [mood, emotion], qi [energy, vital force], shen [spirit], jing [realm, standing], yun [el- egance], fa [discipline], yi [expressiveness], fengge [style], qidu [manner], etc. Ox cutting hardly needs so many categories for its evaluation. From this kind of understanding, Tang Dynasty scholar Zhang Huaiguan said that the practice of calligraphy "is no other than the practice of the great Dao" (Liu Ti Shu Lun), and Song Dynasty Confucian Zhu Changwen said that "When cal- ligraphy reaches its highest perfection, the wonderfulness of it joins the wonderfulness of the Dao." (Xu Shu Duan)

Of course Confucians, Daoists, and Buddhists all have different understandings of the Dao, and the differences show in their aesthetic tastes about calligraphy. For the Confucians the Dao is morally virtuous and the morally virtuous is benevolent, courteous, upright, wise, trustworthy, and follows the golden mean—centrality and commonality. Those characteristics of the Confucian morality determines the Confucian taste about calligraphy. Calligraphy works by Confucians are typically that the strokes are solid, with no sharp ends sticking out, indicating their fullness in self-embodiment and no intention to prick others or to show off. The tip of the brush moves always at the middle of the strokes, indicating a sense of righteousness and centrality. Such brush move- ment method leads to the effect that the marks of the brush are such that when they are thick, they look strong but not swollen, and when they are not thick, they still appear with inner strength and confidence, no weakness or any sign of fearful- ness, nor spiky. The strokes look like a kind gentleman with a broad mind who tolerates, understands, cares, and meanwhile, is full of strength and firmness on principle. Every forward move of the brush is preceded by a backward move as a preparation, and every down- ward line is completed by a slight withdraw of the tip of the brush. The effect of the strokes will be that they all appear with a proper manner, yielding, polite, gentle, with dignity. The structures of the characters are usually stable, solid, indicating their firm stand on righteousness. They may look a little off the proper balance individually, but that is because they are yielding to each other, so that when you look at the whole picture formed by many words, you find a balance of the whole. This is perfectly in accord with the Confucian principle of propriety, according to which individuals must behave in ways that fit their roles defined by one's social position and relationship with others, and fit the particular circumstances.

The best example of Confu- cian calligraphy is Yan Zhenqing's. Yan was a devoted
Yan Zheng's work shows Confucian characters.

official in the Tang dynasty who served the emperor and the country wholeheartedly. On the post of being a governor of Ping Yuan, he implemented policies that benefited the people. When confronting military rebellion, he showed great courage in leading an army to defeat the rebellion, and even single-handedly entered the enemy camp to persuade the rebellions to surrender. Eventually, when given the choice between either to join the rebellions or die, he chose death with no hesitation.

Yan's calligraphy displays his Confucian characters very well. Fully embodied with moral strength, they are strong, vigorous, but not reckless or robust, they are gentle and reserved but not inhibited or noncommittal.

The Daoist takes the Dao to be what is natural. They value simplicity and spontaneity. "Doing by not-doing" is probably the best way to express the Daoist ideal in practice—It is a state in which one is able to do things naturally and spontaneously, with no effort and no arbitrary complication. The Daoist looks for being simple but not self-denial, lively but not bustling, and transcendent but not otherworldly. When such principles are applied in calligraphy, they show preference for less over more, lighter over darker, innocent over articulate, simple over complicate. They like the motion of the brush to be as natural as water sliding down from a leaking wall or a stick drawing on sand—the strokes like that have no arbitrary smoothness, and they never appear to be running out of energy.

A good example of Daoist calligraphy is Shimen Song. It is an inscription on rocks, dated back in the Han Dynasty. "The motion of the brush displayed in Shimen Song is like wild crane and gull in leisure, fleeing like immortals," says the Qing Dynasty scholar Yang Shoujing (Yang, Ping Bei Ji). The strokes look extremely simple and plain, unadorned, almost naive, yet the inner strength and elegance is beyond description. They look reserved, yet everywhere the brush goes it goes with full energy and ease.

A masterpiece of calligraphy that displays both Confucian discipline and also a strong Daoist aroma is Lan Ting Xu, written by Wang Xizhi in 353 A.D. The work has been almost unanimously considered the number-one masterpiece in calligraphy. The original work is lost, allegedly taken to grave by Emperor Tang Taizhong, as the Emperor loved it so much. What we see today are imitations by calligraphers. The work was a pleasant gathering of intellectuals at a scenery around and mountain gentle breeze. In a poem some wine in his staff flowed out of Wang
to persuade eventually, when he decided to join the rebel­
th no hesitation.

Confucian character is up with moral
reserved but not reck­
ed with what is natural. "Doing by
spontaneously, and the strokes all yield
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ness is clearly a cultivated one according to
standard. It displays years of dis-
training and practice. Every stroke,
progression. The
the Buddhist takes the Dao to be “nothingness.” According
eality does not consist of “things.” . . . all our
sufferings come from craving for things that do not exist. We crave
for staying young, but there is no
 eternal youth. We crave for ma-
terial possessions, but no one can keep them forever. Once we un-
derstand this “nothingness,” and
are able to live a non-attached
life, we can be free from suffer-
ing. There are many ways this
kind of philosophy can be re-
lected in calligraphy. One clear
eample is Li Shu tong’s case.
Li’s calligraphy was very handsome
before he became a Buddhist
monk, just like his own physical
appearance. He was extremely
talented, capable of being a fa-
mous writer, actor, calligrapher,
painter, and musician all at the
day are imitations made by Tang Dynasty calligraphers. The work was a draft of an article about
a pleasant gathering together of a group of intel-
lectuals at a scenery spot, with bamboo and water
round and mountains and blue sky bathed in a
gentle breeze. In a very relaxed mood, and with
some wine in his stomach, the calligraphy freely
flowed out of Wang Xizhi’s hand, displaying an
ideal state of being and acting according to the
Daoist goal. Wang himself could not have done
it so well if he were doing it with the intention
of creating the world’s number-one masterpiece
in calligraphy for thousands of years to come.
There were corrections to the text, words added
on the side of a line, words that were deleted by
a block of ink. All these were kept in the imita-
tions because taking them away would affect the
natural beauty of the work. Meanwhile, the natu-
rality is clearly a cultivated one according to
the Confucian standard. It displays years of dis-
ciplined training and practice. Every stroke,
whether a line, a dot, or a turn, follows the proper “li” (ritual)
so that it starts and ends with a
manier, and the strokes all yield
to each other and resonate with
each other to form a harmoni-
ous whole.

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Lan Ting Xu, the “number one masterpiece” in calligraphy by
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same time. At a young age (38, 1918), when his fame was at the peak, to most people's surprise he renounced his earthly life and became a devoted Buddhist monk. Since then he was known as Hong Yi Fashi, and his calligraphy also went through a dramatic transformation. It became less "pretty," less elegant, and less appealing to the popular eyes. It obtained a chilly coldness and simplicity, indicating disinterest in earthly affairs. There are more blank spaces on the works. The characters display little variation, and the strokes move with such a calmness that there is absolutely no anxiety. What is shocking in those works is that they are done by such a talented master, and yet they look so easy going and so "ordinary."

Of course Buddhist philosophy does not have to appear in calligraphy in this particular way. Mi Fu, Shu Shi and Huang Tingjian were all influenced by Buddhism, yet they had different calligraphy styles. Mi's style is more relaxed, expressive and forthright, Su's style embodies more depth, and Huang's style displays vigor and freedom (See Wang, 9).

What I said above shows how calligraphy is affected by the calligrapher's philosophy. Yet the causal relation is bi-directional—calligraphy as a practice also affects the person morally and philosophically.

By following the examples of master calligraphers, one learns not only their skills, but also their moral characters and their philosophy! By learning from Yan Zhenqing, for example, one will be affected by his strength, his uprightness, his broadness in mind. Learning from Shimen Song,
On the other hand, increases one's ability in appreciating simplicity and naturalness. Therefore, selecting which ancient master to imitate is a matter of selecting which philosophy and moral example you want to follow. People generally advise not to select Zhao Mengfu for beginners, that is because his calligraphy is too "pretty." People will be attracted by the pretty appearance and overlook the search for internal strength, discipline, naturalness, transcendence, etc., and easily slip into an evasive, superficial charm that looks like boneless flattery, currying favor with the viewers. That kind of "charm" can be so disgusting that it is worse than natural coarse. Ming Dynasty scholar Fu Shan (1607-1684) wrote the following influential aphorisms: "Rather be dull than be clever; rather be ugly than be charming, rather be broken than be slippery, rather be straightforward than be arranged" (Fu, Zuo Zi Shi Er Sun). He wrote these specifically with Zhao's calligraphy as a reference. He said in the same article that when he was around twenty, he tried to practice calligraphy after all the Jin and Tang Dynasties models that were passed on to him from his ancestors. Yet he could not make his works even look close
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to the models. Then incidentally
he got a piece of Zhao Mengfu’s
calligraphy, and he loved its
smooth curves and flowery
charm, so he practiced after it.
Only after a few times, he was
able to write in a way almost in-
distinguishable from Zhao’s
model. He said: “That is no dif-
erent from learning how to be
a person—when you look after
the models of the morally exem-
plary persons, you feel that it is
as hard to be close to them as
for a curve to fit a straight line;
yet when you go out with gang-
sters, you will feel that you are
closer to them day after day, and
very soon you will be no differ-
ent from them.” “Zhao did
practice after the model of Wang
Xizhi, yet only because his way
of scholarship is not righteous, he
swerved to the way of squishy
glamour.”

There are some other factors
that make the process of practic-
ing calligraphy a process of
moral education and transforma-
tion. Wu Yuru says, “Practicing
calligraphy can help the person
to be calm, and through that,
make the energy full and the
spirit complete. Even a little
haste will turn the motion of the
brush and the ink entirely dif-
ferent” (See Yang, 4). Strokes
cannot be corrected once they
are drawn on rice paper. Any
correction to the strokes will
only make them worse. To the
sensitive eyes, even the slight-
est anxiety or hesitation or the
intention to impress others will
show up in the work. Calligra-
phy therefore naturally requires the practitioner
to be confident and yet modest, calm and yet
full of energy. The practice also helps a person to
learn the benefit of discipline. The disciplines in
calligraphy are not arbitrary rules. They reflect
some natural laws that govern motion and life.
For instance the aforementioned principle that
“let every forward move be preceded by a back-
ward move as a preparation, and every
downward line be completed by a slight with-
drawal of the tip of the brush.” That is just like in
order to jump, one needs to bend down first; in
order to regain balance after running downhill,
one has to lean backward a little. Those are rules
one has to learn in the beginning in order to be-
come a master whose brush can dance gracefully
and with strong energy that will not easily run
out.

The final aim of this kind of learning is to reach
a state of freedom where one no longer stands in
opposition to the non-self. A person well culti-
vated through calligraphy should have the
confidence, calmness, moral uprightness and
courtesy all embodied in the person as her
second nature. When this person is in her callig-
raphy creativity, she will be truly “with herself”
when she forgets the self and when she creates
the non-self.

What I tried to show above is that (1) the
highest aim of calligraphy, according to the
Chinese tradition, is to participate the Dao in ar-
tistic creation; (2) philosophical views and moral
characters influence one’s calligraphy; and that
(3) practice in calligraphy helps practitioners in
building their moral characters and in the for-
mation of their philosophical positions. However,
we must not over-simplify the relationship be-
tween moral characters and calligraphy. In the
Chinese history quite a few notorious “bad
people” were able to write beautiful calligraphy,
for example, Qin Kui, the Southern Song Dynasty
prime minister, who murdered national hero Yue
Fei, Cai Jing (his calligraphy appears above), also
a Song Dynasty official, who would do anything
to get into power, and M
get into power, and M
Chung, head of the “Gang of Ba-
Chung, head of the “Gang of Ba-

tous “Cultural Revolution-
bous “Cultural Revolution-
gang” (see Yang, 4). A neat piece of cal-
gang” (see Yang, 4). A neat piece of cal-
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calligraphy work by a notorious

One way to explain the attrib-
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appearance. According to Su Shi, who be-
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lieved in clones, a calligraphy
lieved in clones, a calligraphy
contains all the genetic infor-
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mation. A calligraphy work is therefore
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a clone containing all the genetic infor-
mation. Whether this per-
mation. Whether this per-

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The practitioner is the master, calm and yet helps a person to achieve the disciplines in the rules. They reflect motion and life. A principle that proceeded by a slight without that is just like in running downhill, not easily run. Those are rules in order to become graceful and not easily run.

Learning is to reach the person well cultivated and standing in the person as her handwriting is in her calligraphy. "with herself" when she creates.

One way to explain those counter-examples is proposed by Su Shi. Su differentiates the goodness of calligraphy from mere groomed appearance. According to Su, a person who has no training in calligraphy has little skill in writing a neat piece of calligraphy work, so the handwriting can be very undisciplined and coarse; yet somewhat like how any cell in a person can be used to clone the person because it contains all the genetic information of the person, a calligraphy work contains all the philosophical and moral commitments of the person in it. Whether this person is honest, innocent,
or righteous, can still show up in the way she writes the strokes. "A man without a righteous mind will inevitably show in his calligraphy some sign of obsequiousness or cruelty" (Su, Ba Qian Jun Yi Shu Yi Jiao Jing. The same statement is also seen in his Shu Tangshi Liuja Shu Hou).

Su’s view quoted above was developed from a broader view which was first clearly stated by Zhang Huaiguan and later by Liu Gongquan. Zhang says: "It takes several words for an article to convey an idea, it takes only one character for a calligraphy to display a heart-mind" (Wenzi Lun). When Liu was asked by emperor Mu Zong about the way to move the brush, he answered “When the heart-mind is right, the brush will be right.”

But we must be careful here to observe that the state of the heart-mind contains more than just moral qualities. It contains many other aspects of the mind such as personality, mood, etc. Bai Jiao calls the sum total of the state of the mind “essence of calligraphy,” which include mood, personality, spiritual understanding, and aesthetic taste. Late Qing scholar Yang Shoujing (1839-1915) adds two points to the three points (genius, seeing a lot of good works, and diligent practice) made by another about what is the key to learning calligraphy; one is to have a supreme moral quality. When one’s moral quality is superior one’s brush moves with elegance, and will not be flunkey. Another is to have rich knowledge. When you have knowledge about thousands of things in your mind, the “qi of the volumes will naturally fill between the lines” (See Gu, 42). Furthermore, it seems that, while one’s moral qualities do affect one’s calligraphy, they do not necessarily show up in every stroke, and even if they do they are not often discernible. There is a tremendous room for subjective interpretation and even empathic projection.

Su was in fact aware of the possibility of subjective projection. This awareness shows strangely in a statement that is entirely opposite to what we quoted from him above. He says in that statement, “When one looks at a calligraphy, some people think that one can get information about the person. If that were the case, whether the person is a gentleman or a petty-minded person would surely be displayed in the calligraphy. But that is not the case. One cannot even judge a person from one’s outlook, how can one judge a person from calligraphy? Sure, when I look at Lu Gong’s [Yan Zhenqing] calligraphy, I would indeed not only see his personality, I would even imagine his graceful demeanor, as if I were seeing him censure Lu Qi and condemn Xi Lie. Why? The reason is the same as Han Fei Zi’s story about a man lost his ax.” (Ba Lu Gong Tie). In that story from Han Fei Zi, a man who lost his ax suspected that his neighbor stole it. His neighbor’s behaviors looked like a thief’s in his eyes. However, after he found his ax, his neighbor’s behaviors all looked perfectly normal. There was no difference in the neighbor’s behaviors. The difference was entirely subjective projection.

This view, as it is too extreme, finds little echo in the history. It is as implausible to argue that moral quality of the person has nothing to do with calligraphy as to argue that every stroke in calligraphy shows moral quality of the person. The fact is more likely that though some calligraphy works can be evaluated in terms of moral qualities, some cannot. When one writes like print, the work may

Simply be neat and not to make more careful care for the value in the calligraphy. For instance, it is much good ambition may show up more easily in calligraphy from one who has Zao Zedong’s calligraphy. Mao, they say, displayed remarkably well his broad courage. They show little care for life, friends, others. Similarly, in the example of a piece typical, it is hard to imagine his courage, confidence, and courage. It is a piece, and yet it is also hard to know just this person is from.

Su has a third view that Su Peimin Ni.

He says that “The calligraphy in ancient times is the scribes’ life as well; if they were not to achieve calligraphy would not be the calligraphers’ life as well; if they were not to achieve calligraphy would not be the calligraphers’ life as well; if they were not to achieve calligraphy would not be the calligraphers’ life as well; if they were not to achieve calligraphy would not be the calligraphers’ life as well.” (Shu Tangshi Liuja Shu Hou. Words, moral standard is the same way in judging the good. The word is a somewhat ambiguous because of the interpretations. The first word is different from another. Person is immoral, his calligraphy value regardless of the life matter. 
Another is to have knowledge of qi in your mind, the "qi" fill between the strokes. Therefore, it seems that, in the end, the effect one’s calligraphy work show up in every aspect, they are not often simply be neat and nothing else. We may also need to make more careful analysis about different ways in which different moral qualities affect calligraphy. For instance, petty-mindedness will show up more easily in calligraphy than the lack of care for the value of life, and one who has much good ambition may not differ much in calligraphy from one who has much evil ambition. Mao Zedong’s calligraphy (shown above) is a good example. Mao, the most influential leader of the Chinese communist movement, was also a master in calligraphy. His calligraphy works show remarkably well his broadness in ambition and courage. They show little, however, how much he cared for life, friendship, and love.

Similarly, in the example on the following page, it is hard to imagine that a person with no courage, confidence, and determination can write this piece, and yet it is also hard to judge exactly how just this person is from this piece of work.

Su has a third view that deserves some attention. He says that “Those who comment on calligraphy in ancient times comment on calligraphers’ life as well; if the person was not decent, the calligraphy would not be taken as valuable either.” (Shu Tangshi Liujia Shu Hou) In other words, moral standard is superior to other standards in judging the goodness of calligraphy. A groomed piece of work may appear attractive to the eyes but still has no real value. This point is somewhat ambiguous between two more precise interpretations. The first one is that moral standard is different from aesthetic standards. If the person is immoral, his calligraphy works have no value regardless of their aesthetic achieve-
ments. This view was supported by Huang Ting Jian, a contemporary of Su. Indeed, the bad guys are hardly mentioned in the history of calligraphy. Cai Jing was originally one of the “Four Great Masters in Northern Song Dynasty.” But his name was later replaced by another Cai—Cai Xiang, because Cai Jing had a stinky moral reputation. In On Calligraphy, Huang writes: “In learning calligraphy one should keep the Dao and Righteousness in mind, and broaden the self by the teachings of the sages. Only then the calligraphy will be valuable. If your spirituality had no discipline, even if you were able to use you brush and ink no less skillful than Yuanchang and Yishao, you would still be a vulgar.” (Lun Shu)

The other interpretation is that moral standard is the highest one among aesthetic standards. A calligraphy work that lacks moral goodness in it has a fatal defect in it aesthetically. This interpretation, whether accurate in stating what was truly in Su’s mind or not, is more consistent with the traditional Chinese aesthetic spirit. In the Chinese intellectual tradition, aesthetics is never sharply separated from morality. The highest aim of both is one and the same—a state of freedom, in which there is no more separation between the subject and the object, the “heaven” and the “human.” In that state, one is able to express one’s own heavenly nature in one’s own creative activity, and fully enjoy the union. The union between what is heavenly and what is human will show up in the calligraphy works with moral characters, and the display of superior moral qualities is itself aesthetically attractive, and therefore deserves the respect as one of the (if not the) highest criteria of aesthetic value.

A couplet by Xion Renwang.

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