

A Study on the Practice of Aesthetic Education in Universities Carried by the Visual and Associative Beauty of Traditional Chinese Calligraphy

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Abstract: As the core carrier of the fine traditional Chinese culture, calligraphy art boasts a dual aesthetic system with multi-layered and profound connotations, namely visual beauty and associative beauty. Visual beauty presents intuitive formal aesthetic perception through the strokes, character structures, and composition of Chinese characters, serving as the foundation of calligraphic aesthetic education. Associative beauty generates spiritual aesthetics based on textual implications, phonological rhythms, humanistic connotations of texts, and the moral cultivation of calligraphers, acting as the core sublimation of calligraphic aesthetic education. At present, university aesthetic education classrooms generally suffer from teaching deficiencies: overemphasis on technical skills while neglecting aesthetic cultivation, and overfocus on brushwork techniques while ignoring humanistic literacy. From the perspective of this dual aesthetic system of calligraphy, this paper systematically interprets the aesthetic connotations, internal relations, and practical contradictions between calligraphic visual beauty and associative beauty, explores implementation approaches to integrate the dual aesthetic paradigm into university aesthetic education classrooms, and constructs a calligraphic aesthetic education teaching model of “laying foundations through techniques, improving quality via aesthetics, and shaping souls with humanities.” It provides references for the reform of aesthetic education featuring the fine traditional Chinese culture and practical education in universities in the new era.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese calligraphy; Visual beauty; Associative beauty; University aesthetic education; Classroom practice

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1. Introduction

University aesthetic education in the new era is a crucial measure to fulfill the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and enhance college students' aesthetic literacy and cultural confidence. As a unique

Chinese visual plastic art integrating formal aesthetics and humanistic spirit, calligraphy stands out as one of the most compatible curriculum carriers for university aesthetic education with profound deposits of fine traditional Chinese culture. Compared with other aesthetic education forms such as painting, music and dance, calligraphic appreciation combines visible formal beauty and profound spiritual beauty, forming a complete educational closed loop covering visual perception, aesthetic judgment, humanistic edification and value shaping.

The aesthetic feelings brought by calligraphy to viewers are multi-dimensional. Classified by the aesthetic sources of calligraphic works, they fall into two main levels. The first is the inherent beauty of calligraphy itself, namely visual beauty, which belongs to concrete and visible formal aesthetics. The second is the beauty derived from calligraphic texts, the original authors' thoughts, as well as the morality and personality of calligraphers, namely associative beauty, which belongs to abstract and spiritual value aesthetics. Visual beauty focuses on perceiving character forms with eyes, while associative beauty centers on evaluating textual connotations and the morality of both calligraphers and original writers through mental reflection. Complementary and dialectically unified, the two form the complete aesthetic system of Chinese calligraphy and provide a clear, scientific teaching logic for university calligraphic aesthetic education classrooms. Reconstructing university calligraphic aesthetic education classrooms from the dual aesthetic perspective can effectively address the prominent problems of superficial, skill-oriented, and homogenized aesthetic teaching, and realize the profound transformation of aesthetic education from "handwriting skill training" to "aesthetic literacy cultivation and inheritance of the fine traditional Chinese culture."

2. Connotation analysis of the dual aesthetic system of traditional Chinese calligraphy

2.1. Visual beauty of calligraphy: The intuitive perception foundation of university aesthetic education

Among the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, sight serves as the most important medium for humans to perceive the external world. The visual beauty of calligraphy is generated through vision, referring to the visual charm embodied in the shapes of Chinese characters. Therefore, observation is the fundamental method to appreciate the aesthetic appeal of calligraphy.

Different from music, which relies on hearing, and films that combine sight and sound, the aesthetic foundation of calligraphy lies in the visual delight brought by the linear structures of Chinese characters. Such delight stems from the unique artistic style of Chinese characters, making it the most fundamental and primary teaching content of university calligraphic aesthetic education.

As is well known, Chinese characters originated from pictographs. Pictographs denote objects by depicting concrete images, which are direct visual creations of ancient Chinese people. Later, Chinese characters evolved continuously under the six writing principles: pictography, self-explanatory characters, associative compounds, pictophonetic characters, mutually explanatory characters, and phonetic loan characters, eventually forming the modern Chinese character system. Regular script took shape and was continuously refined in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, consisting of five basic strokes: horizontal, vertical, left-falling, right-falling, and folded strokes. A dot can be regarded as a shortened form of the right-falling stroke. Separately, these five strokes are merely simple symbols with no independent meanings. However, their organic combinations in varied length, thickness, density, and curve create countless distinct character

structures, laying the core foundation for the visual beauty of calligraphy. It follows that exploring the proper writing and layout of these five strokes to fully express the aesthetic charm of characters is a core research topic in calligraphy studies and the aesthetic experience of calligraphy.

According to the existing history of Chinese writing, oracle bone inscriptions are the earliest Chinese characters and already possess elementary visual aesthetics. The evolution of bronze inscriptions, seal script, clerical script, and regular script not only made reading and writing easier, but also improved people's ability to appreciate the aesthetics of Chinese characters. The evolutionary history of Chinese scripts is also a process of continuous aesthetic optimization for calligraphy. Generally speaking, the aesthetic charm inherent to Chinese calligraphy manifests in three dimensions: first, the beauty of character strokes; second, the structural beauty of individual characters formed by combined strokes; third, the compositional beauty of character groups, namely layout beauty formed by a collection of characters.

Strokes in calligraphy vary widely: thick or thin, long or short, horizontal or vertical, left-falling or right-falling, dot or fold, forceful or delicate, gorgeous or plain. It requires long-term practice to master the most aesthetically satisfying way of writing these strokes. Strokes are ultimately assembled into individual characters, which distinguishes primary and secondary strokes, with their spacing and layout complying with visual harmony. Likewise, individual characters are grouped into an integrated whole. Such character groups are unified entities that require visual beauty for every single character as well as overall harmony after arrangement. As some scholars put it, "Calligraphic beauty is holistic"^[1]. The holistic beauty of calligraphy lies in the harmonious coordination of character size ratio, character spacing, character position, and ink density, all of which must satisfy human visual aesthetic demands.

Hence, the formal beauty of calligraphy mainly resides in the linear structure of individual characters and the layout harmony between characters. This inherent visual charm constitutes the basic aesthetic quality of calligraphy; without it, any discussion of the deeper connotative beauty of calligraphy would be groundless.

In university aesthetic classrooms, the visual beauty of calligraphy acts as the entry-level foundation for students' aesthetic cultivation. Through observation, copying, and comparative analysis, students perceive the formal charm of strokes, character structures, and layout, and build basic aesthetic cognition, modeling ability, and artistic perception. This is an indispensable preliminary teaching link of calligraphic aesthetic education. Without the technical foundation of visual beauty, humanistic edification and spiritual cultivation can never be realized, nor can the inheritance of the fine traditional Chinese culture be fully carried out.

2.2. Associative beauty of calligraphy: The humanistic spiritual core of university aesthetic education

The associative beauty of calligraphy is a high-level spiritual aesthetic experience transcending visual brushwork techniques. It generates value resonance based on the form, pronunciation, and meaning of Chinese characters, textual backgrounds, and calligraphers' moral character, serving as the core carrier for universities to realize the mission of fostering virtue through education. It is divided into four dimensions: associative beauty of personality, associative beauty of character meanings, associative beauty of textual artistic conception, and associative beauty of phonology.

2.2.1. The associative beauty of personality refers to the aesthetic association derived from the moral character and conduct of the calligrapher

Chinese calligraphic aesthetics has long adhered to the evaluation criterion that “style mirrors character.” A calligrapher’s life experience, moral cultivation, and inner temperament directly determine the aesthetic value and spiritual depth of his works. The unrestrained and open-minded spirit of Wang Xizhi and the loyal, upright integrity of Yan Zhenqing bring audiences more than merely the brushwork beauty of their works, such as Preface to the Lanting Collection; they also convey the noble character embodied by the masters and their life stories. Master Qi Gong, a contemporary calligrapher, remained grateful, indifferent to fame and wealth, devoted to academic research, and committed to public welfare all his life. His noble moral cultivation greatly elevated the artistic conception of his calligraphy. On the contrary, calligraphers with vile morality will never win high recognition from the public even if they possess superb writing skills. For example, Cai Jing of the Northern Song Dynasty, Qin Hui of the Southern Song Dynasty, and Zhang Ruitu of the Ming Dynasty boasted exquisite brush techniques and perfect visual forms, yet their works were never regarded as model materials for aesthetic education by later generations due to their flawed moral conduct, receiving mixed critical comments ^[2]. Fu Shan, a thinker and calligrapher living between the Ming and Qing Dynasties, despised Zhao Mengfu for serving the Yuan royal court, and thus belittled both his personality and calligraphy. This serves as a typical embodiment of the tradition of prioritizing morality in the appreciation of fine traditional Chinese culture. This aesthetic feature of associative beauty of personality enlightens universities that calligraphic aesthetic education should not only teach writing skills, but also carry out moral education through the noble spirits of famous calligraphers, so as to educate people with aesthetics and nourish their souls with morality.

2.2.2. The associative beauty of character meanings

Chinese characters inherently carry Confucian philosophies of self-cultivation and social interaction derived from the fine traditional Chinese culture. Creating calligraphic works with positive characters such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trust, and tranquility can convey philosophies of self-improvement. The single-character horizontal scroll of Tranquility enables viewers to comprehend the maxim “One cannot clarify his aspirations without indifference to fame and fortune, nor reach distant goals without inner peace” ^[3]. Yue Fei’s handwritten Memorial to the Late Emperor integrates Zhuge Liang’s loyalty to the nation with his own patriotic feelings, expanding the connotation of aesthetic education through character meanings and guiding students to cultivate a positive temperament. Calligraphic creation consciously avoids vulgar and negative phrases and pursues elegant, inspirational texts to exert the educational value embedded in characters.

2.2.3. The associative beauty of textual artistic conception refers to the associative aesthetic feeling endowed to calligraphy by its written texts and historical backgrounds

The famous poems and essays copied in calligraphy mostly contain profound life philosophies, patriotic sentiments, and spiritual pursuits, making them high-quality materials for university aesthetic education. For instance, Wang Bo’s line “Old yet vigorous, never shift one’s lofty aspirations even in old age; poor yet steadfast, never abandon noble ideals” inspires uplifting spiritual beauty; Fan Zhongyan’s motto “Be the first to worry about the nation’s woes and the last to share its joys” embodies noble moral character rooted in patriotism and concern for the people; Lu Xun’s verse “Fierce-browed, I coldly face thousands of pointing

fingers; head bowed, I willingly serve the people like an ox” reveals his devotion to the masses; Zhou Enlai’s poem “I meditate ten years to break through barriers; should my aspirations fail, drowning myself for the nation still makes me a hero” expresses lofty ideals. In short, philosophical verses written by the original authors of calligraphic texts always bring diverse enlightenment to readers. At this moment, viewers value not merely the external formal beauty of calligraphy, but also its inner spiritual charm. As one scholar states: “Written texts set the keynote of works and build a bond between creators and their art.”^[4] When universities guide students to appreciate and create calligraphic works, students can perceive the spiritual power behind texts across time and space, realizing the in-depth integration of aesthetic experience and value shaping. From my perspective, this is the key to improving the quality and efficiency of university calligraphic aesthetic education for inheriting the fine traditional Chinese culture.

2.2.4. The associative beauty of phonology refers to the auditory associative beauty derived from the phonological rhythm of Chinese characters in calligraphy

The unique monosyllabic feature and tonal cadence of Chinese characters constitute an aesthetic advantage unavailable in Western alphabetic scripts. The phonetic charm brought by Chinese syllables in calligraphy is an additional aesthetic layer generated by character pronunciation, which can be fully reflected in calligraphic copies of Chinese poems and prose. In other words, texts selected for calligraphic works often carry rhythmic phonetic beauty. For instance, poems and couplets used for calligraphy follow Chinese tonal rules of level and oblique tones. The alternation of tones endows Chinese syllables with musicality and further strengthens auditory aesthetic perception, a unique feature that no other writing system around the world possesses. Even when calligraphers compose original texts for their works, they will consciously or unconsciously arrange content according to Chinese tonal patterns. Most contemporary calligraphers take famous poems as major creation materials. In recent years, many teachers have integrated poetry and calligraphy into classroom teaching, which is well received by students and brings forth a new educational insight: “The integrated beauty of poetry and calligraphy manifests as humanistic beauty, human nature beauty and integrated beauty”^[5]. The remarkable effectiveness of integrated poetry-calligraphy teaching lies in the full combination of the external visual beauty of calligraphy and the phonetic rhythmic beauty of written texts. In addition, numerous couplets written by master calligraphers are preserved in ancient sites and temples across China. The content of these couplets matches the surrounding scenery and forms an integral part of these scenic spots. Obviously, such calligraphy relies on the tonal rhythm of couplets that conforms to tonal regulations. Visitors can easily perceive the phonetic harmony between upper and lower couplets during appreciation, which explains why couplets are widely displayed in tourist architecture all over China. When universities guide students to recite, appreciate, and copy such calligraphic works, students can perceive both the visual beauty of brush and ink and the phonological beauty of characters. This realizes audio-visual interaction and multi-dimensional edification in aesthetic education, effectively enriching students’ ability to perceive the fine traditional Chinese culture from diverse aesthetic perspectives.

In general, the associative beauty of calligraphy is essentially an aesthetic projection of values. The aesthetic appreciation of traditional Chinese calligraphy never merely judges brushwork techniques; instead, it forms a comprehensive aesthetic system integrating morality, fine traditional Chinese culture, philosophy, and personal character, which is highly consistent with the core goal of university aesthetic education — “cultivate people with culture and nurture souls with aesthetics.”

3. Existing problems of university aesthetic education classrooms from the dual aesthetic perspective of calligraphy

At present, university calligraphic aesthetic education classrooms generally suffer from separation and imbalance between visual beauty and associative beauty, failing to give full play to the educational value of the dual aesthetic system of calligraphy, which is mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

3.1. Overemphasis on technical training and neglect of humanistic edification leads to superficial aesthetic education

Most university calligraphy courses center on copying, brush control, and character structure training. They excessively pursue neat character shapes and standard brush strokes, one-sidedly focus on training students in the visual beauty of calligraphy, and ignore teaching on humanistic connotations, moral cultivation, and cultural philosophy contained in associative beauty. Students only master handwriting skills without understanding the cultural spirit behind calligraphy, resulting in an educational defect of “being able to write yet unable to appreciate art or grasp the fine traditional Chinese culture.” Consequently, the educational value of aesthetic education can hardly be realized.

3.2. Insufficient innovation in aesthetic teaching results in rigid and monotonous classroom forms

Restricted by traditional teaching mindsets, some teachers hold the view that calligraphy, after thousands of years of development, has reached its peak with little room for innovation and breakthrough. Consequently, they stick to conventional teaching patterns and lack modern-oriented, life-related, and youth-friendly teaching innovations. Meanwhile, the calligraphy circle is plagued by problematic trends such as “ugly calligraphy,” “bizarre calligraphy,” and “unregulated folkstyle calligraphy.” These works onesidedly pursue sensational visual effects to seek attention, deviate from orthodox calligraphic aesthetics, mislead students’ aesthetic cognition, and undermine the unity between the visual beauty and humanistic beauty of calligraphy.

3.3. Utilitarian tendencies among some educational practitioners weaken the value-guiding role of aesthetic education

A small number of calligraphy educators are eager for quick success, prioritizing fame and fortune over self-cultivation. They one-sidedly pursue commercialized and performative creation while neglecting personal moral cultivation and cultural accumulation of the fine traditional Chinese culture. Their calligraphic creations are divorced from the spiritual core, leading to a severe lack of associative beauty in works and the problem of “exquisite handwriting paired with shallow moral character, and disconnection between artistic skill and moral integrity.” This is unfavorable for guiding college students to establish correct outlooks on art, aesthetics, and values.

4. Practical paths for university calligraphic aesthetic education classrooms from the integrated dual aesthetic perspective

Based on the aesthetic law of the dialectical unity between the visual beauty and associative beauty of calligraphy, university calligraphic aesthetic education classrooms should break the single skill-oriented teaching mode, build an integrated education system featuring “foundation-building via visual aesthetics,

quality enhancement via associative aesthetics, and integration of morality and art,” and achieve the in-depth integration of technical aesthetic training, aesthetic appreciation cultivation and humanistic edification.

4.1. Consolidate the foundation of visual aesthetic education and build a systematic technical training system

Visual beauty forms the foundation of calligraphic aesthetic education. University classrooms should establish a scientific and systematic technical teaching system and carry out tiered teaching across three core dimensions: strokes, character structures, and overall layout. At the elementary stage, brush control training is intensified to guide students to perceive the aesthetic differences in stroke thickness, rigidity, softness, dryness, and moistness. At the intermediate stage, teaching focuses on the structural rules of Chinese characters, enabling students to master the modeling principles of density, primary-secondary hierarchy, and the balance between slanted and upright forms. At the advanced stage, emphasis is placed on compositional layout to cultivate students’ holistic aesthetic awareness and layout design ability. Meanwhile, students copy classic orthodox stele calligraphy models to develop a standardized, sound, and elegant aesthetic cognition rooted in traditional calligraphy, resist the misleading vulgar aesthetics of “ugly calligraphy” and “bizarre calligraphy,” and consolidate their foundational visual aesthetic competence.

4.2. Delve deep into the connotations of associative aesthetic education and realize humanistic spiritual edification

The four dimensions of calligraphic associative beauty shall be fully integrated into classroom teaching to elevate aesthetic education from formal “form appreciation” to profound “spiritual perception.” First, moral stories of master calligraphers are introduced. Combined with the deeds of virtuous and skilled calligraphers such as Wang Xizhi, Yan Zhenqing, and Qi Gong, personality-oriented aesthetic education is carried out to guide students to cultivate noble character. Second, the semantic connotations of Chinese characters are interpreted. Integrated with traditional values of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and trust, as well as concepts of self-cultivation and self-motivation, students perceive the philosophies of fine traditional Chinese culture through writing practice. Third, the backgrounds of classic poems and essays are appreciated to explore the patriotic sentiments, striving spirit, and broad life vision behind the texts, realizing cultural edification. Fourth, integrated poetry-calligraphy teaching is strengthened. Through reciting verses with tonal cadence, visual and auditory aesthetics are combined to enrich the forms of classroom aesthetic education. Students can achieve aesthetic improvement and value shaping through writing, appreciation, and reflection.

4.3. Innovate classroom teaching modes and promote the modern transformation of traditional aesthetic education

The traditional single copying teaching mode is replaced by a four-in-one teaching model integrating appreciation, copying, creation, and reflection. Before class, students appreciate works by master calligraphers to perceive the charm of dual aesthetics. During class, targeted technical training is carried out to consolidate the foundation of visual aesthetics. After class, students are encouraged to conduct independent creation themed on inspiration, patriotism, and fine traditional Chinese culture, integrating humanistic associative beauty into creative practice. Meanwhile, new media technologies including short videos, digital exhibition halls, and online appreciation platforms are utilized to enrich classroom carriers, enabling traditional calligraphic aesthetic education to adapt to the learning habits and aesthetic demands of

contemporary college students.

4.4. Attach equal importance to morality and art and establish correct evaluation guidance for aesthetic education

A diversified aesthetic education evaluation system integrating technical aesthetics, humanistic literacy, creative thinking, and moral cognition shall be established, replacing the single evaluation mode that only judges the quality of character forms. The evaluation assesses not only students' writing techniques and visual modeling ability, but also their understanding of the humanistic connotations of calligraphy, the spirit of master calligraphers, and cultural philosophies. It guides students to deeply recognize the aesthetic principle that "calligraphy style reflects moral character," consciously abandon utilitarian and vulgar artistic perceptions, and cultivate aesthetic competence featuring both moral and artistic excellence, as well as unity of knowledge and practice.

In conclusion, "The synchronous evolution of the aesthetic thinking of Chinese characters and their writing forms is the driving force for the continuous development of the art of Chinese character writing"^[6]. "The status of calligraphy as an art form is inseparable from the moral character and cultural mentality of calligraphers"^[7]. The visual beauty of calligraphy serves as the formal foundation of calligraphic proficiency, defining the aesthetic backdrop of the art of calligraphy. By contrast, the associative beauty of calligraphy acts as the spiritual core for elevating calligraphic competence and determines the value height of calligraphy-based education. The two form an organic whole that is mutually reinforcing and inseparable. Given that China has long applied the dual criterion of "integrating moral integrity with competence" to evaluate individuals' merits and demerits, and even to judge the quality of artistic works, the dual dimensions of visual beauty and associative beauty require university aesthetic education classrooms to be rooted in the dual aesthetic system and break the teaching dilemma of disconnection between technical training and humanistic cultivation. On one hand, visual beauty consolidates students' artistic foundation, teaches them to uphold the basic spirit of calligraphic innovation, and guides them to produce innovative works. On the other hand, associative beauty nurtures students' spiritual character, teaches them to value the cultivation of personal morality, enhances their personal charisma, and strives for the realm of both moral and artistic excellence with a pragmatic approach of unity of knowledge and practice. The author holds that by continuously advancing the in-depth integration of traditional Chinese calligraphy culture into university aesthetic education, and adopting scientific classroom practice paths to guide college students to inherit the fine traditional Chinese culture, improve aesthetic literacy and foster patriotic sentiments through hands-on calligraphy practice, educators can truly achieve the fundamental goal of university aesthetic education: educating people with aesthetics, cultivating people with culture, and nourishing hearts with morality.

Disclosure statement

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