
Cultural Signification and Philosophy Embedded in Chinese Calligraphy: A Semiological Analysis

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Abstract: Chinese brush calligraphy has not only aesthetic value, but it is also fully loaded with semiological signification of Chinese *qi* philosophy. Adopting Roland Barthes's theory on signs, this paper aims to discuss signification of *qi* in Chinese calligraphy. In addition, drawing on the Saussurean dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* as well as Barthes's contention about signification and metalanguage, I argue that in the underlying *langue* of Chinese culture exists the philosophy of *qi* as a whole, whereas calligraphy is one of the genres for *qi* to be manifested and signified.

Keywords: Semiology, Roland Barthes, Signification, Chinese Calligraphy, Culture

1. Introduction

Embodying the philosophical concept of Dao, which refers to the way the universe runs, and being a practice of self-cultivation [31], ancient Chinese brushwork calligraphy conveys much more than aesthetic values. According to Barthes's [4] theory on transitivity: "The object serves man to act upon the world, to modify the world, to be in the world in an active fashion; the object is a kind of mediator between action and man." In this sense, Chinese brushwork calligraphy can be construed as a signifying object and practice, manifesting the connection between the calligrapher and the world. Drawing on Roland Barthes's interpretation of signs and their semiological meanings [2] [3] [4], this essay aims to discuss signification of *qi* in Chinese calligraphy. In addition, referring to the Saussurian dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* as well as Barthes's ideas about signs, I argue that in the underlying *langue* of Chinese culture exists the philosophy of *qi* whereas brush calligraphy exhibits and signifies *qi* of the calligrapher.

2. Chinese Calligraphy

2.1. Calligraphy as a Vehicle for Messages

Derived from the Greek *κάλλος* (beauty) and *γράφειν* (write), the English word 'calligraphy' is construed as 'beautiful-writing' with a great many decorative flourishes

[22]. Turgut [32] defines calligraphy as elegant and aesthetic writing arts performed according to significant aesthetic and design rules.

In fact, in addition to the aesthetic appearance, calligraphy as a form of written scripts can convey messages as verbal language does. As Roberts et al [25] point out in their discussion about signification of script inscription, "scripts communicate in many ways--- through their appearance, their placement, and the very act of writing." In a great many cultures, calligraphy can signify far beyond the script's semantic meaning itself. For instance, calligraphic forms are associated with religious devotion in Islamic and African cultures [10] [11]. Similarly, in Chinese brush calligraphy, produced via the brush and ink, the movement of the brush and the momentum of the composition are construed as vehicles embodying the calligrapher's inner essence and spiritual cultivation.

2.2. The Symbolic Meaning of Chinese Calligraphy

A distinctive feature regarding ancient Chinese aesthetics is that the artist's noble character is taken as an essential, if not the most important, factor to determine the artistic product's aesthetic values. A calligrapher's achievements and greatness in character are always juxtaposed with his brushwork, and evaluative vocabulary used to describe his personality and character is also used to evaluate his artwork. For instance, in the book *Behind the Brushworks*[19] there is such a statement

describing Yan Zhenqing (709-785 A. D.), a general and scholar-official serving in the era of the Tang Dynasty: “[As] an important political figure, Yan Zhenqing was *straightforward*, *loyal*, and *faithful* to the Emperor” (italics my emphasis). Following this statement is evaluation of his brushworks: “In keeping with the Chinese saying that a person’s character is reflected in his brush calligraphy, Yan’s brush writing, in particular his *Kai Shu* (brush calligraphy of the regular style), was *solemn* and *dignified*, powerful, heavy, and described as having muscles like warriors. It is full of energy and is called Yan’s Style” (italics my emphasis) [19]. Apparently, there is an association between the adjectives ‘*straightforward*, *loyal*, and *faithful*’ describing Yan’s moral constitution and the two adjective ‘*solemn* and *dignified*’ describing his brushworks. Figure 1 shows one of Yan’s brushworks:



Figure 1. A Brushwork of Yan Zhenqing (709-785 A. D.) (The source of the figure: [18]).

The fact that the artist’s positive inner essence outranks his techniques differentiates Chinese aesthetics from western aesthetics. In ancient discourses on aesthetic values of calligraphy, pervasive is the idea that a person’s calligraphy performance could reflect his temperament and spirituality [6] [16] [19]. The following are two expressions showing the conventional connection between the calligrapher’s spiritual sense and his brushwork calligraphy:

- (1) *ren zheng zi zheng*
person upright handwriting square
‘If the person is upright, his handwriting is straight and balanced.’
- (2) *ren ru qi zi*
person resemble his handwriting
‘A person’s temperament is reflected in his handwriting.’

2.3. The Philosophy of Qi and Chinese Calligraphy

The connection between brush calligraphy and the calligrapher’s spiritual sense is related to the concept of *qi*, which is generally rendered into various concepts such as ‘inner energy’, ‘inner essence’, ‘vital force’, ‘vital essence’, ‘momentum’, or ‘spiritual temperament’ [6] [7] [17] [18] [19] [20] [29] [33]. In archaic as well as modern Chinese discourse, *qi* is the essence that signifies and motivates a person’s life

[33]. It indicates the man’s talent and constitution. One’s superiority in talent and robust constitution could be projected to and reflected in one’s brushwork.

Qi is also associated with influence from the surroundings¹. It signifies the inner strength that the calligrapher has cultivated and harbored, originating from the inspiration of the greatness, from meditation, or from living a life in tune with nature [24]. Throughout Chinese history, mainstream propositions regarding aesthetic values and philosophical thoughts embodied in Chinese brush calligraphy stress that practicing brush calligraphy is a way of cultivating pure *qi*, i.e. inner essence, and thus a way of self-cultivation. Mencius (372-289 B. C.), a great master of the Confucius’ tradition, contended that cultivating flood-like *qi* goes with righteousness and *Dao*, which refers to the pattern of Nature and the way the universe runs. With positive constitution of *qi* within the calligrapher, his brushwork would signify his lofty spiritual essence. This resonates with Sun Guoting’s (646-691 A. C.) contention in his writing on *The Treatise on Calligraphy* that perfection of art depends on spirituality. Hundreds year later, Jiang Kui (1155–1221 A. C.) took a similar stance. In the section entitled ‘character and temperament’ in his writing *Sequel to the Treatise on Calligraphy*, he stated that a noble character is the first requirement to make calligraphy manifest vigor² [5].

3. Semiological Signification

3.1. Barthes’s Semiological System

In the Saussurean legacy and subsequent scholars’ writings [2] [8] [21] [14], semiology deals with three terms: The *signifier*, the *signified* and the *sign*. For example, a bunch of roses signify passion. The roses act as *the signifier* and *the signified* is the concept of passion. While the roses and the concept of passion existed independently before the sign is formed, the sign is essentially construed as the association and unification of the signifier and the signified. Accordingly the rose is taken as a *sign* of passion.

Following Saussurean’s theory on the *sign*, Barthes foregrounded the association which unites the three terms. In the above example of roses, Barthes [3] notes that there are not only the signifier (roses) and the signified (concept of passion) but also the third term---the sign: ‘passionified roses’. He proposed a semiological chain system, which includes not only the conventional signifier-signified-sign system (the first-order system) but also a second-order system. In Barthes’s semiological chain system [3], the *sign* in the first-order system, which is the linguistic system, becomes a mere *signifier* in the second system, i.e. the mythical system, as illustrated in Table 1, where the three terms in the first-order

1 In ancient Greek philosophy, a counterpart of the Chinese notion of *qi* is ‘pneuma’, defined by the great Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Like the Chinese *qi*, the Greek *pneuma* is construed as the primary connective substance by which the organic interrelationships of all creatures are established and maintained [33].

2 Both treatises are translated into English by Chang and Frankel in the book *Two Chinese treatises on calligraphy* [5].

system are represented with Arabic numerals but with Roman numerals in the second-order system:

Table 1. Barthes' semiological chain system.

	language	MYTH	
1	Signifier		
2	Signified		
3	Sign	I	SIGNIFIER
		II	SIGNIFIED
		III	SIGN

Barthes referred to the third term in the first-order system as *sign*; however, it is not possible to use the same word again in the second-order system without ambiguity. He therefore referred to the third term in the second-order system as *signification* in his analysis [3].

3.2. Signification as Metalanguage

The two systems as shown in Table 1 above are staggered in relation to each other: The linguistic and the mythical system. In Barthes' own words, the second-order system is a '*myth*' system and can be construed as *metalanguage* [3]. Metalanguage is a second language, in which one speaks about the sign in the first-order system. Barthes used a picture to illustrate mythical speech, or metalanguage. In the picture, a young black soldier in uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted fixing on the French national flag. All this is the linguistic meaning signified by the picture in the first-order system. However, beyond this, Barthes sees the '*signification*' in the second-order system: The France is a great empire, and all her people, regardless of colors or races, faithfully serve under her flag; even the black shows zeal in serving the colonial French. Here in the second-order system, the signified 'French imperialism' gets its presence through the signifier, that is, the picture showing a black soldier saluting to the flag [3].

Barthes contended that myth or metalanguage is a type of speech, which is "chosen by history" [3]. It is stressed that "it cannot possibly evolve from the nature of things" [3]. Instead, it is developed and comes into being through social-historical discourse. The speech of myth is thus arbitrary and culture-specific. *Signification* therefore has in fact a double function: "It points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" [3]. For Barthes, signification in the mythical system is construed as 'ideas-in-form' [3], and it is part of semiology because it is a formal science. It is also part of ideology because it is a historical science. Like linguistic signs, objects can also become speech if they mean something. In the following section, I am going to draw on Barthes' theory regarding ideas-in-form to discuss signification of Chinese calligraphy.

3.3. Signification of Chinese Calligraphy

Signifying objects always have a function, a utility, or a purpose, and on the other hand they can also function as 'the vehicle of meaning' [4]. In the case of Chinese calligraphy, the brushwork serves the purpose of aesthetic value, and it also serves to exhibit the calligrapher's inner essence and spiritual

self. Drawing on Barthes's two-order semiological system, we can take a product of Chinese brushwork as a signifier and take 'conveyance of aesthetic values' as the signified. The sign is thus formed. On the other hand, such a sign becomes the signifier in the second-order system, and what is signified is '*qi*' or the inner essence and spiritual quality of the calligrapher. We will see in Section 4 that the signification results from historical discourse on philosophy of *qi* in Chinese culture.

Chinese brushwork is an object carrying a message about the calligrapher's *qi*. It is a signifying object. On the other hand, *qi* does not exist or come to being in the history of Chinese calligraphy aesthetics naturally. Instead, it is developed in and as the result of historical discourse on humans' inner essence and their connection with Nature and the surroundings. It deserves our notice that a statement such as "the brushwork of General Yan Zhenqing (709-785 A. D.) is solemn and dignified, powerful and heavy, and full of energy (*qi*)" (cf. Section 2.2) not only bears on his efforts in self-cultivation of inner strength but also bears on his righteous deeds and noble character in biography. If a viewer without any training in calligraphy aesthetics does not know anything about General Yan Zhenqing, then for the viewer, the association between the brushwork and the concept of *qi* would not happen or would be relatively weak. The viewer might just notice the superficial artistic composition of the work. On the other hand, if the viewer knows about the account of the calligrapher's life, the brushwork's value and manifestation of *qi* through the brushwork could make sense to the viewer immediately. I take this phenomenon as the effect of accumulated sociohistorical discourse or metalanguage on the concept of *qi* in Chinese culture. Chinese people believe in the value of pure, upright inner essence (i.e. *qi*) in a person's overall aspects of life. If ideology is defined as certain beliefs generally acknowledged in a society, I propose that *qi* is a kind of ideology and that it is both constituted and constitutive in sociohistorical discourse of various genres, including aesthetics of brush calligraphy. In other words, brushworks are objects which convey and are loaded with the ideology or beliefs in *qi*.

A merit for us to examine the role of *qi* in Chinese brush calligraphy by drawing on semiological perspectives and Barthes's scheme of signification is that they allow us a structural scheme to capture and account for the elusive connection between *qi* and evaluation of brush calligraphy. By exploring sociohistorical metalanguage regarding *qi* embedded in brushwork, we are exploring a Chinese 'vision of understanding man and the world' [13].

4. Qi in Chinese Culture

4.1. Cultivation and Manifestation of Qi in Chinese Culture

This section is to discuss historical propositions about Chinese brushwork, including those based on philosophical thoughts on Daoism, Confucianism and the calligrapher's inner essence. The discussion would lead readers to

understand how sociohistorical discourse brings about and constitute the association between Chinese philosophy of *qi* and calligraphy artworks and how the signification has come into being.

4.1.1. *Qi in Daoism*

As an essential part of propositions in both Daoism and Confucianism throughout the Chinese history, *qi* has been rooted in the collective discourse up to date. In the writings of Daoists, the world began with *qi*. The two Daoist sages, Lao Zi (in the 5th century B. C.) and Zhuang Zi (369-286 B. C.) construed “Dao as the noumenon of the universe, the highest law and eternal principle, the ultimate truth” [33]. In accordance with Dao, the dynamics of the universe are in balance and function in harmony. If we construe Dao as the great river of all beings, then the relationship between *qi* and Dao can be captured: “*Qi* is the fact and substance of this river’s flow” [33]. As a modality of being, humankind is also part of the great unity [31]. In the archaic Chinese worldview, Dao is revealed in Nature and in human social practices, including the practice of art [9]. Thus in practicing calligraphy, the ultimate ideal is to have the calligrapher’s *qi* harmonized with Dao and to realize Dao in moving the brush pen [9] [16] [17]. Chen thus comments that “calligraphy is Dao’s incarnation, an embodiment of the divine law” [6]. To achieve this ideal, the calligrapher needs to cultivate pure *qi* or inner essence.

4.1.2. *Qi in Confucianism*

In addition to Daoism, Confucianism also discoursed on the nature of *qi* and on its crucial role in the humanity’s social practices, including the brushwork practice [9] [31] [33]. The Confucian school emphasized the individual’s efforts in refining one’s *qi*, his inner essence. Meng Zi (about 372-289 B. C.) wrote of an all-encompassing *qi* that can be enhanced and rectified “through meditation and the practice of benevolent humanity, education, and rationalism” [33]. With morality implicated, *qi* is conceived here as spiritual momentum, generated by spiritual self-cultivation and nourished with integrity [30]. Development of such spiritual *qi* relies on pondering over Nature and understanding of how the human should live a life that harmonizes with the divine principle of the world, i.e. Dao [33].

Such philosophical discourse stressing harmony and unification with Nature is connected to aesthetic values of Chinese art forms. Both Taoists and Confucianists share the belief that self-cultivation is basic to achievement in art [30]. In practicing brush calligraphy, the ideal is for the calligrapher to transform his perception of Dao into the emotional momentum required in practicing calligraphy. This emotional momentum is in fact the calligrapher’s individual *qi* [33]. At the end of the 5th century, Xie He (479-502 A. C.) first coined the phrase *qi yun shengdong* and took it as the prioritized principle in artistic brushwork. In the phrase, *qi* means the vitality, *yun* means the resonance that can touch the viewer and connect the calligrapher’s inner essence with the external world while *shengdong* means ‘vividly alive’. The expression *qi yun shengdong* therefore means the manifestation of

resonating vitality in the artwork. Since then the idea encoded by this phrase has become a most sought-after aesthetic value in Chinese arts [15].

Each step in practicing the brushwork, from grinding the ink on the ink stone to moving the brush, is highly mindful [16]. This gives the calligrapher an opportunity to nourish his inner essence and spiritual self, gradual enhancement of which is in turn manifested in the brushwork. Therefore there is a dynamic interaction among the three elements: 1) The calligrapher’s enhanced spirituality, 2) Dao ‘the divine law’, and 3) the brushwork practice. I schematize the dynamic interactions with bi-directional arrows in Figure 2 below:

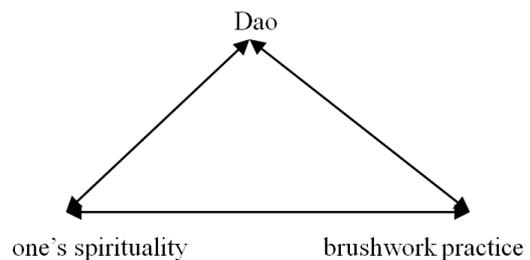


Figure 2. The dynamic interaction among the three elements.

Internalization and reflection upon Dao helps nurture the calligrapher’s *qi* and spirituality, which is revealed in his brushwork performance. On the other hand, the dynamic world and Nature keeps enlightening the calligrapher on Dao (or the divine principle of the universe), which then infuses strength and enhanced spirituality into his brushworks. Meditation on the dynamic interactions among the three elements has been essential for calligraphy artists in antiquity as well as in modern Chinese communities.

4.2. *Qi as Langue of Chinese Culture*

In exploring objects’ meaning, Taborsky points out the concept of ‘signification’ can be understood as an object having a meaning, which is not inherent but ‘socially’ and ‘historically’ developed. Therefore, “object-as-signs are specific to a group” [27].

As a signified concept, *qi* is not inherent in Chinese calligraphy (cf. discussion in Section 3.3). To account for why the concept of *qi* pervasive in Chinese culture has got associated with the art of brush calligraphy, we may draw on Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857-1913) well-known dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* for an account.

In Saussure’s writing on linguistics, there is distinction between the two terms--- *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* refers to the speaker’s underlying competence or knowledge of his language while *parole* refers to one’s ‘actual’ uses or performance of the language. Barthes [4] [23] [27] extended Saussure’s of *langue* and *parole* to all types of signs and applied them to communication of all forms, including nonverbal communication. In his discourse on semiology, Barthes identified the *langue* as the *signified* and as the body of social and historical understanding, which must operate through social actions. From the *langue* of the society generates *parole*, which refers to actual actions, spoken

expressions or communication behaviors. These concrete performances or embodiments are the *signifiers*. To be socially perceived and meaningful, the signifiers must be in accordance with socially understood conventions [23]. Following Saussure and Barthes, Leeds-Hurwitz [21] explicates that there must be an underlying system of conventions, values, or cultural beliefs from which signification is derived and imposed on signs. In Barthes's terminology, this underlying system is the *langue* of the society, and individual social practices, behaviors, and signs (both verbal and nonverbal) are the *parole* [2].

Applying the dichotomy to the signification of *qi* in Chinese calligraphy, we may construe *qi* as the underlying cultural beliefs in the overall Chinese culture while each piece of brushwork is a *parole* and manifestation of *qi*. The relationship between the underlying system of cultural values or beliefs and actual performances is illustrated in Figure 3:

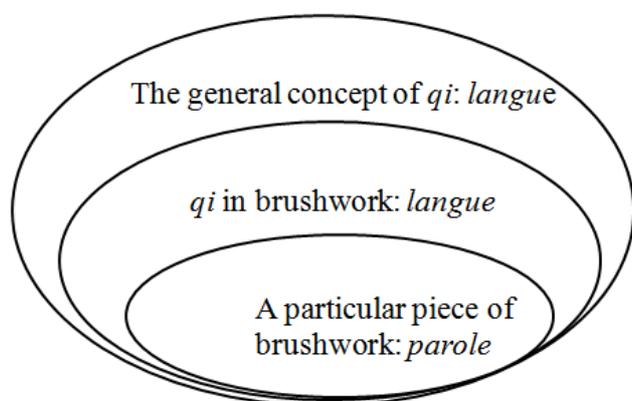


Figure 3. Levels of *qi* in Chinese culture (The figure is adapted from Leeds-Hurwitz [21]).

Figure 3 encapsulates the idea that “a sign conveys a cultural content” [27]. The largest circle represents the general concept of *qi*, historically developed and pervasive in discourses across genres, such as cosmology, philosophy, ethics, medicine, *feng shui*, arts, and diverse aspects of Chinese life. The concept of *qi* itself is an underlying cultural system, the *langue*, driving and accounting for people's behaviors or social practices. The middle circle represents a smaller set of *qi*, which dictates a specific genre or aspect, e.g. the practice of brush calligraphy. From the underlying system of *qi* and its signification in brush calligraphy generates the *parole*--- manifestation of *qi* in a particular brushwork---which is represented by the smallest circle.

4.3. Historical Dialogic Relations

It is noted that as long as intellectual-scholars' and master calligraphers' name and achievements are kept in history their *qi* and inner essence would continue engaging in historical dialogic relations with viewers or readers across generations. Such a dialogic relation throughout history and across times can be well illustrated by the creative intertextuality [28] demonstrated in the artistic dancing produced and performed by Cloud Gate, a professional dance theater in Taiwan.

In a choreographic trilogy, premiered in 2001, 2003 and 2005, Lin Hwai-min, the choreographer and director of Cloud Gate, appropriated elements of traditional brush calligraphy and recontextualized them into choreography. Lin Hwai-min stated that *qi* of master calligraphers in antiquity is the element that they would like to interpret in dancing. The following statement is the introduction to the first of the choreographic trilogy:

Cursive [a style of brush calligraphy], is the first of the trilogy, with its title derived from Chinese calligraphy. After studying Chinese calligraphy masterpieces, Lin found, despite the differences in styles, all the brush works share one common element: The focused energy with which the calligraphers ‘danced’ during writing. He asked Cloud Gate dancers to improvise by facing blown-up images of calligraphy. The dancers absorbed the energy, or *qi*, of the calligrapher and imitated the linear movement of ink, full of lyrical flows and strong punctuations with rich variations in energy. The exercise produced unimaginable movements, from subtle slow motions to martial-arts-like attacks with powerful energy. These eventually became the movement material for the choreographic performance of *Cursive*³.



Figure 4. Intertextuality of *qi* between brush calligraphy and dancing.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have seen that Chinese calligraphy as a form of visual representation can not only serve aesthetic purposes but also serve as a site for self-cultivation. In fact, Chinese calligraphy is not the only type of calligraphy that carries values and messages beyond aesthetics. Islamic calligraphy, for instance, is not only for decoration but it often carries religious messages sourced from the Quran or Mohammedan teachings [1] [12]. Similarly, calligraphy manifested in Tatar shamails also has a religious function [26].

Referring to Barthes's theory on signification and the Saussurean dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*, I have argued

³ The introduction is an excerpt from the official website of Cloud Gate. <https://www.cloudgate.org.tw/front/staticPage/pages/cursive> (last retrieved on March 18, 2017).

that in the underlying *langue* of Chinese culture exists the philosophy of *qi* whereas brush calligraphy is a medium through which *qi* of the calligrapher is exhibited and signified. There are advantages for us to adopt semiological perspectives to explore *qi* in Chinese brush calligraphy. As mentioned in Section 3, semiology allows us a concrete structural scheme to capture and account for the elusive connection between *qi* and evaluation of archaic Chinese brush calligraphy. The signification of *qi* is not inherited in the brushwork itself; instead, it is sociohistorically constituted and constitutive in brushwork aesthetics. Semiology, as a science of sign, can thus contribute a supplementary explanation to archaic treatises on brush calligraphy and to aesthetic education of brush calligraphy as well. A second advantage bears on Saussure's dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*. Manifestation of *qi* is not only discussed in the genre of brush calligraphy, but also in other Chinese artistic forms--- painting, martial arts, literary works, ethics, etc. --- and aspects in daily life. The totality of *langue* as the underlying cultural system and realization of *parole* in individual pieces of brushwork together can offer a systematic explanation for the pervasiveness of *qi* in Chinese culture and for its signification in brush calligraphy.

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