

# **Chinese Calligraphy From the Perspective of Art Morphology: The Game Between "Natural Writing" and "Visual Art"**

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**Abstract:** Chinese calligraphy is not only an act of "natural writing", but also a creation of "visual art". Of the two attributes, which one occupies the status of the noumenon has become our concern and debate. Understanding and grasping the morphology generated by calligraphy ontology is conducive to clarifying its historical development, way of existence and relationship with society. The instrumental value and aesthetic value of calligraphy are the two wings of its ontology, which reflect the essential characteristics, social functions and development momentum of calligraphy. The creation tools, material carriers and distribution methods of calligraphy have formed specific forms such as calligraphy style, momentum and tasting in the historical context, gradually melting the two attributes of "natural writing" and "visual art" into one pot. "Epigraphy", "Stele Theory", "Model Calligraphy", "Seal and Clerical Script", "Skill & Clumsiness" and "Hidden Edge" not only exist as theoretical vocabulary of calligraphy art, but also cultural representation of writing behavior.

**Keywords:** Natural Writing; Artistic Consciousness; Instrumental Value; Aesthetic Value

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Calligraphy is the functional "natural writing" of ancient China. Revision of historical books, writing of official documents, copying of prescriptions, correspondence and letters, writing poems, etc., are all writing behaviors based on different social life scenes. Calligraphy developed into a "visual art" in these acts of writing, and its aesthetic consciousness is generally considered to have been established in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Whether the ontology of calligraphy is "natural writing" or "visual art", we can find clues in the historical evolution of its art morphology. The study of calligraphy art morphology is to understand and grasp the structure of the world of calligraphy art, so as to clarify its historical context, way of

existence, and relationship with society. As Kagan pointed out in *Morphology of Art*, "Morphology is the doctrine of structure; it refers to the structure of the art world instead of the structure of the art work. However, it is inappropriate to attribute the study of the structure of the art world to a systematic analysis of artistic styles, because there are other levels of classification of artistic creation activities." (Zhu, 2006) Calligraphers, calligraphy creation, calligraphy appreciation, calligraphy criticism, and their respective relationships with the world, constitute unique artistic morphology such as "calligraphy style", "stone inscriptions", "seal calligraphy" and "calligraphy tasting".

## 2. "NATURAL WRITING" AND "VISUAL ART" AS IDEOGRAPHIC VISUAL SYSTEMS

Fundamentally speaking, Chinese characters, different from Western phonograms, are ideograms. Its shape, sound, and meaning are not just the result of conventions, but have a fixed relationship and form an organic whole. In this sense, the Western phonogram system is more inclined to an auditory system. Each of its letters is not a relatively complete audio-visual perception object. Only after they are arranged according to certain rules can they form an overall effect. In China's Chinese character ideographic system, each Chinese character itself is already a relatively complete audio-visual perception object, so it is more effective in expressing emotion and experience.

### 2.1 From A Writing Tool To A Creative Tool

The three modern discoveries in the history of calligraphy: oracle bone inscriptions, Han bamboo slips, and Dunhuang scrap paper documents provide new historical evidence for the medium of calligraphy. Just like the study of primitive art such as Lascaux cave paintings, we must trace the origin of calligraphy art from the earliest preserved objects with artistic features. "Chinese calligraphy, strictly speaking, started with oracle bone inscriptions, because oracle bone inscriptions already have the three elements of calligraphy, namely, the use of brushes, knots and composition." (Guo, 1972) The earliest creation tools for calligraphy began with carving knives. In the development of calligraphy art, written recording tools have been continuously integrated into the ontology of calligraphy as an aesthetic taste, so it can be seen that carved seal occupies a place in a complete calligraphy work.

"Oracle bone inscriptions are things carved on fairly hard tortoise shell and animal bones with copper knives or stone knives. The characters are carved neatly and beautifully. The big ones are more than half an inch in diameter, and the small ones are as thin as sesame seeds." (Guo, 1972) During the Yin and Shang Dynasties, carving knives were the main tools for calligraphy creation. The dragon-shaped bronze knife unearthed from Tomb No. 186 and the fish-shaped jasper carving knives from Fuhao Tomb of Yin Ruins in Anyang are all historical relics. (Zhao, Zhong, & Bai, 1982) Some scholars also deduce that Yin & Shang people already used brushes, writing first and then engraving. "We still have direct evidence that we found written but not engraved characters on the ox blade bone used for divination... Some inscriptions were only written with a brush but not engraved, and some were only engraved with straight drawing, which can be seen as written first and then engraved." (Dong, 1933) In any case, judged from the completed works, oracle bone inscriptions present the characteristics of thinness, toughness and sharpness, with remarkable blade and obvious engraving, since the creative tools determine their artistic styles. In the history of modern calligraphy, there was also the phenomenon of using a brush to deliberately pursue the style of oracle bone inscriptions. This writing style of using a brush to imitate a knife on a hard texture created a unique artistic atmosphere and realm, resulting in various styles and morphology of calligraphy art.

The historians of the Shang and Zhou dynasties had already used brushes to make written records on bamboo slips. Most of these slips were made of bamboo and also of wood, and their narrow, long and separate spatial attributes also affected the appearance of calligraphy at that time. However, "so far, no bamboo and wood slips from the Shang and Zhou dynasties have been found in archaeological excavations in China. The earliest bamboo slips discovered in our country are mainly relics from the Warring States Period to the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty." (Lu, 2015) It can be seen that the writing brush, as a tool for written records, has been popularized in the social functional field at that time, which is mainly related to recording state affairs, laws, and history. It does not have the self-consciousness of calligraphy art, but its preserved form already belongs to the category of calligraphy art. "Han bamboo slips are like freehand brushwork. The fonts of the Han bamboo slips are natural and naive, rough and messy, unkempt, and even sloppy, some of which seem to reveal the information of the Jin people's cursive." (Deng & Huang, 1999) During the Eastern Han Dynasty, papermaking was improved, making the marriage of brush writing and paper media. Coupled with the low cost of

paper and easy writing, this fixed collocation quickly became popular. During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, this writing method became the absolute mainstream, which also announced that the creation tool system of calligraphy art began to take shape.

By the Tang Dynasty, brush writing on paper had become quite mature, and stone inscriptions were also popular, and the mutual influence and integration between them became more profound. The manufacture and use of "ink" and "inkstone" have also reached a high level and scale, so the creative tool system has become mature. Historical phenomena such as the sluggishness of inscriptions in the Song and Yuan Dynasties, and the revival of the "Study on Inscriptions" in the Qing Dynasty all occurred in the continuous development of this creative tool system. This is not only a conscious "choice" of the "visual art" dimension of calligraphy, but also influenced by social trends of thought, technical conditions and many other factors.

## 2.2 The Social Functionality And Aesthetics Of The Material Carrier

"Chinese artists have never consciously cultivated their sensibility for abstract space in the art of calligraphy, but in fact all the spiritual connotations of this time-honored art are completely integrated in the lines and the spaces divided by lines. The art of calligraphy has influenced the way of feeling of the whole nation with its pure spatial form." (Qiu, 2005) This consciousness of time and space reflects the stalemate state of calligraphy between "natural writing" and "visual art". This state of being intertwined and separated from each other is more prominently reflected in the two material carriers of stone tablet and paper. Stone inscriptions are more stable in preservation than calligraphy on paper, which reflects the artist's mentality of orderly transmission. At the same time, stone inscriptions are more of a public display in terms of viewing methods, rather than a desk-based acceptance method. Therefore, in terms of time-space relationship, the extension of time is emphasized, with limited mobility in space. Paper calligraphy works break through the limitation of space, removing the requirement of time and place. The special forms such as hanging scrolls and horizontal scrolls are breakthroughs in the way paper books are privatized and accepted on desks, which are inevitably influenced by the way stone inscriptions are viewed. The inscriptions, on the other hand, embody the characteristics of rich changes in the relationship between time and space. They are the unity and penetration of the two ways of acceptance, which is an exquisite invention.

Bronze ware is a special material carrier, and this metal texture creates a

unique "bronze inscription". Bronze was a precious metal in the pre-Qin period, and it was a symbol of power and will, while the early larger bronze wares were mostly "sacrificial utensils", so the characters carried mostly had religious or ritual functions, which is different from decoration or embellishment on utility utensils. When text is only used as a means of modeling, the layout of space and the beauty of the individual become the entire pursuit, but the text records for social functions, while having aesthetic factors, extend a time-space relationship that transcends space, which is related to psychological factors such as worship, prayer, and wish.(Ling & Jin, 2011) " The evidence of these early prestigious artifacts leads to the conclusion that once a new technique was invented and a 'precious' material was discovered, they would be absorbed into the liqi tradition and used for entirely non-utilitarian purposes. It is only logical that bronze casting was employed to produce religious paraphernalia and status symbols." (Qiu, 2005; Wu, 1996)The material carriers of Chinese calligraphy, from tortoise shells, animal bones, and bronze ware to bamboo slips, wood, and then to paper and stone tablets, not only shows the adaptability of the technological innovation process to social functions, but also reflects the ability to grasp time and space from the perspective of art and aesthetics, which is a gradual shift from the "natural writing" dimension to the "visual art" dimension of calligraphy.

### 2.3 Increasing Sensory Activity

From "natural writing" to "visual art", it must be a process of increasing sensory activity.To experience and feel the beauty in daily and functional writing, and then elevate calligraphy to an art, is the result of mobilizing the senses.Marshall McLuhan pointed out in *Understanding the Media- The Extensions of Man*: "The so-called media is the message, it is nothing more than saying that any influence of any medium (that is, any extension of human beings) on individuals and society is made by the new scale; any extension of us (or any new technology) introduces a new scale into our affairs." (Marshall, 1994)The medium is an extension of human faculties and displays technical survival of the fittest in social activities.At the same time, he also divided the media into "hot media" and "cold media" according to the mobilization and stimulation of the human senses by the media." A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition'. High definition is the state of being well filled with data...The hotting-up of the medium of writing to repeatable print intensity led to nationalism and the religious wars of the sixteenth century." (McLuhan, 1994)When words are combined with different media, their "coldness" and

“hotness” will vary in degrees, with different degrees of mobilization of human senses.

Oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions are both related to religious ceremonies or power etiquette. Both media have "high definition", with particularly clear object of their function. Whether it is praying for good weather or exercising the will of power, the purpose is clearly identifiable. It is also difficult for us to imagine how much imagination was needed by the Yin Shang and pre-Qin people who faced oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions to get more than ritual functions from these words—such as beauty, education, probation and so on. Therefore, the medium of the earliest Chinese calligraphy is very simple to mobilize people's senses.

It wasn't until paper became the main carrier of calligraphy art that the popularity of the medium gradually decreased, and people's sensory activity reached its peak. Within certain space, how to roam and gallop freely in the world depends entirely on the subtle changes in the strokes, the exquisite consideration of the use of ink, and the wisdom of the composition. This results in a low-resolution message able to engage the audience's senses and imagination in all directions. The fact that artistic characteristics of calligraphy gradually become prominent from social functions relies precisely on this powerful sensory stimulation.

Zheng Banqiao's calligraphy is described as "painting bamboo", Jinnong's calligraphy as "lacquer calligraphy", and Song Huizong's calligraphy as "thin gold style". These evaluations and metaphors are precisely aimed at the visual form of calligraphy. This also just shows from the negative side that in most cases, calligraphy does not directly carry out such creation. When the social function of calligraphy is gradually separated from the aesthetic function, its clarity as message drops to a very low level, and thus the stimulation and mobilization of human senses reaches its peak.

### 3. FORMATION OF "WRITING" ONTOLOGY AND "ART" ONTOLOGY

In ancient Chinese calligraphy, tracing the origin of calligraphy often starts with characters. Yu Jianwu said in *Calligraphy Grading*: "The name of calligraphy originated from 'Xuanluo', and the form of characters from Cangshi. Therefore, the knotted ropes were left, the characters were taken, the shapes were imitated, and human affairs were understood, without

spreading the ropes or deepening into the text.” (University, 2014a) Whether the ontology of calligraphy is “natural writing” or “visual art” relies on the relationship between modeling based on characters and social context. With the development of calligraphy art ideas and techniques, this kind of shape is no longer limited to the characters themselves, but a holistic aesthetic. The dimension of “natural writing” gradually merges with the dimension of “visual art”, to form different art morphology.

### 3.1 Calligraphy: The Context Switch Of Art Morphology

Zhang Huaijin described in detail the historical development process of big seal script, small seal script, neo-clerical script, clerical script, semi-cursive script, cursive script and the corresponding artistic features in *Analysis of Six Scripts*. Each “script” has its own historical stage, with its own distinctive features. When the concept of “script” matures, it is no longer a completely linear development, but integrated into specific context, which can be switched freely, or even appear at the same time. “When the shape is seen, it is called image, and the calligrapher imitates the image. The mind cannot explore things ingeniously, and the ink cannot express the mind completely. Drawing it with consideration, generating it with form, harmonizing it with breath, and calming it with spirit, you may cut it and reorganize it in an adaptable way. The method itself has no fixed form, which values interchangeability.”

The specific classification of “script” is a relatively complicated system. Big seal script, small seal script, clerical script, semi-cursive script, cursive script, and regular script are currently the most popular categorizations. However, in ancient Chinese theory of script, the methods of categorization are different. Not only that, each “script” is also sub-categorized, for example, “cursive script” can be roughly sub-categorized into “seal cursive”, “current cursive”, and “exaggerated cursive”. Wei Xu even sub-categorized the “script” into fifty-six forms in *Fifty-six Scripts*. In the preface, he clarified his derivation process, and commented on how to go from “six scripts of old characters” to “eight scripts” to “twelve double-hour script” and the “twenty-three scripts” added later. No matter how eclectic the artist is, there is no ambiguity in the inheritance of “script”. However, Wei Xu's categorization has actually overflowed the category of “script”. For example, “Twenty-two Insects-like Scripts”, “Forty-five Snake-like Scripts”, “Forty-eight Dragon-Claw-like scripts”, etc., are all descriptions of postures under the influence of calligraphic naturalism, which have not really solidified into “script” with the advance

of calligraphy history. It should be pointed out that the "script" carries the functional needs and tool attributes of calligraphy in the practice of "natural writing" in the past dynasties, and also presents the style and posture of calligraphy as "visual art" at different stages. In the switch of social contexts, the unity of calligraphy ontology will be maintained: that is, as the mutual transformation of the dual attributes of "natural writing" and "visual art" at a specific time node and space field.

### 3.2 Form And Meaning: Calligraphy As An Act Of Imitation And Modeling Of Characters

The use of brush is a part of forming the characters, which is the smallest unit used for modeling in calligraphy. Related references include "way of brush", "stance of brush" and so on. Ancient calligraphers followed a tradition of pursuing naturalism, and believed that calligraphy was not only an imitation of nature, but also transcended the entire composition of imitation, to achieve the realm of communicating with nature and even integration. In *Nine Postures*, Cai Yong put forward the way of brush as "stopping the brush for characters", "turning the brush", "hiding the edge", "hiding the head", "protecting the tail", "rushing forward", "grabbing the brush", "restraining" and "horizontal scale", with the principle of naturalism. "The calligraphy originates from nature, when nature is established, yin and yang are born, and when yin and yang are born, the form and posture appear." The principle of naturalism has many metaphors in the theory of calligraphy. For example, Mrs. Wei mentioned "bone", "flesh" and "tendon" in *Brush Array*, "those with the vigour of strokes are more bony in script; those without the vigour of strokes are more fleshy in script. Those with more bony script are called tendon script; and those with more fleshy script are called ink pigs. Those who have more vigors and tendons are holy; those who are vigorless and have no tendons are sick." In Yuan Dynasty, Chen Yizeng described the skill of using brush in a more systematic way, in his *Hanlin Tips*, with "Blood Method", "Bone Method", "Tendon Method" and "Flesh Method" respectively. He pointed out that the way of brush is not only an artistic means of modeling, but also a writing behavior that imitates nature and people.

Calligraphy has the characteristics of freehand brushwork, emphasizing artistic conception. Therefore, when discussing techniques, calligraphers often do not stop at the formal level, but seek "meaning", and use the concepts of "Tao", "Qi" and "Shen" in the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi to explain the higher realm of calligraphy art. Su Shi emphasized at the beginning of *On Script*: "A script must have spirit, energy, bone,



flesh and blood, which cannot be missing as an integrity." In ancient theories of calligraphy and drawing, it is often said that "meaning comes before brush", which emphasizes the importance of spirituality. Therefore, it is precisely through the satisfaction of basic way of brush, posture, composition and other formal requirements that calligraphy works move closer to the level of "artistic conception", and finally integrate the work, people and the universe, which leads to a philosophical dimension. From this perspective, calligraphy, as the dimension of "visual art", is also the embodiment of human action and spiritual will, and is an artistic creation and aesthetic activity carried out under the behavioral state of "natural writing".

### 3.3 Grade: The Judgment Of Writing Purpose And Artistic Level

"Grading" is not only a graded commentary method to distinguish the high and low quality of art works, but also reflects the judgment on the purpose of writing and the pursuit of realm. Xiong Bingming believes that ancient calligraphy theory is divided into two schools when classifying grades, "one school regards spiritual grade as the highest, while the other one regards surpassing grade as the highest." (Xiong, 2002) Yu Jianwu retrospected, at the beginning of Calligraphy Grading, the origin and history of characters and calligraphy, with further comments on the evolution of "script". The criterion he adopts is historicism, and he believes that calligraphy changes with the times, and the methods and standards of creation also keep pace with the times, which need to be analyzed according to specific situations. Calligraphy Grading discusses one hundred and twenty-three calligraphers from the Han Dynasty to the Qi and Liang Dynasties respectively, by the grading system with nine grades from ultimate upper, middle upper to middle lower and ultimate lower. Through this comparison, it also reflects the way of thinking of categorization.

Later Calligraphy Grading also explained the grading standards at the beginning. Li Sizhen's principles have a naturalistic tendency, emphasizing the compatibility with "God" and "Heaven". Later Calligraphy Grading listed 82 calligraphers, divided into three grades, and each grade was divided into three sub-grades, which also imitated Yu Jianwu's grading method from "ultimate upper" to "ultimate lower". However, Li Sizhen listed the "ultimate upper grade" and put forward the first level of "surpassing grade" for the first time, which are four calligraphers Zhong Yao, Zhang Zhi, Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi.

Calligraphy Grading is the same as the grading in other art categories, focusing on "tasting", which is a genre of commentary, with essence in

evaluation rather than grading. It is precisely because of such a special grading system that objectively establishes a new dimension for the morphology of calligraphy.

In addition to Calligraphy Grading, there are often groups of opposing concepts in the theory of script, such as "clumsy" and "skillful", "ugly" and "fascinating", "urgent" and "slow", "manifest" and "hidden", "plump" and "thin" and so on. These "contradictory" categories that appear in pairs also have a relationship of successive inheritance in the theory of calligraphy, reflecting its likes and dislikes in calligraphy aesthetics. More importantly, this reflects the division of "style" or "character" in the morphology of calligraphy. The fineness and breadth of the division can reflect the maturity and volume of the development of this art. In this sense, calligraphy, as a "visual art", also has the attribute of reflecting personality, ethics, customs, etc. and providing historical basis for "natural writing".

#### 4. THE COMPOSITE FORM OF INSTRUMENTAL VALUE AND AESTHETIC VALUE

The Rites of Zhou refers to "rites", "music", "shooting", "driving", "literacy" and "computing" as "six arts", and calligraphy is the basic skill in its aristocratic education system. Before the artistic self-consciousness of calligraphy came into being, it was more about the function and value at the level of tool.

With the gradual emergence of the aesthetic consciousness of calligraphy, calligraphy as an independent art category continues to mature and prosper, and the discussion on the function of calligraphy begins to move towards the aesthetic dimension. As an act of "natural writing", calligraphy produces instrumental value, while as a "visual art", it produces aesthetic value. The form of calligraphy preserved in the process of historical dissemination is the composite value form of these two dimensions.

##### 4.1 Educational and recording functions in the ruling system

Yu Jianwu of the Southern Dynasties started from the generation of characters in Calligraphy Grading, and then talked about the recording function of calligraphy: "If you dance with the ancients at the beginning, you will resonate with them for thousands of years; if you simplify them and pass on to the present, you will be kept thousands of miles away from them. If you record the good, the evil will diminish itself, and if you write

the virtuous, you will correct your mistakes." (University, 2014b) There is a hidden intention here, that calligraphy expresses the official moral and ethical stance by recording history or state affairs, with the function of advocating and leading customs. It is through such a mechanism that the purpose of maintaining rule is achieved. That is "appraisal", like a mirror for examining oneself.

In the early Tang Dynasty, Yu Shinan said in *The Essay on the Essence of the Brush*: "The foundation of calligraphy and art is also the beginning of kingship. Cangjie imitates the shapes of mountain, river and sea, as well as the traces of dragon, snake, bird and beast, for establishing the six scripts. The Warring States period has different politics and customs, as well as different characters and scripts, while the Qin Dynasty is obsessed with multiple categories of about eight styles."

From this, we can realize that the function of calligraphy was originally closely related to characters, and it was an effective means of political rule. "Writing must comply with characters" is seen as a measure to consolidate the rule. Yu Shinan expounded the specific mechanism of calligraphy to achieve the function of maintaining rule in the *Description of the Essence of Calligraphy*.

"The ancients drew hexagrams to erect images, and created characters to set up teaching... the calligrapher is like that, narrating things and keeping oaths." This is a step further than Yu Jianwu, pointing out the reason why calligraphy can promote social morality and make people examine themselves. Its essence is education. So far, the function of calligraphy has been tied to the official educational function, thus playing the role of consolidating the rule.

This point of view also had echoes later, such as Zhang Huaiguan. He pointed out in *Judgment of Calligraphy*: "It (calligraphy) enables one to think about the sages thousands of years ago, and read the old traces on the bamboo slips... the calligrapher, through imitating, stretching, writing and recording, illustrates everything and records the past for the future." The transmission of history relies on written words. The educational function of calligraphy can promote customs and examine oneself by recording history. The instrumental value keeps the ontology of early calligraphy stable in the dimension of "natural writing", while the dimension of "visual art" is still a derivative of the ontology, hidden but not obvious.

#### 4.2 Aesthetic Dimension: Following Nature, Expression And Imagery

The calligraphy theory before the Wei and Jin Dynasties emphasized

"following nature", which can be said to be more identical with nature than imitating nature. Subsequently, the function of calligraphy tended to turn inward. Wang Xizhi said in *The Theory of Calligraphy* that "calligraphy is a mysterious skill. If you are not a talent with lofty ideals, you will fail in learning to achieve it." During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, metaphysics and impetuous character prevailed, and calligraphy was also integrated into the entire cultural atmosphere, participating in philosophical speculation and the baptism of the spiritual world. The function of calligraphy art on the spiritual level is also a manifestation of the increasingly obvious aesthetic purity, which is far away from the actual utilitarian level.

In addition to the idea that calligraphy can have an impact on people's spiritual world, it also mentioned the function of calligraphy art in expressing emotions and demonstrating people's psychological state. In the Ming Dynasty, Xiang Mu said in *The Differentiation of Graceful Words on Calligraphy*: "Man is spiritual against all things, and the soul is in charge of all bones. Therefore, what arises from the mind can be morality when it's hidden, can be statesmanship when it's manifested, can be honor when it's cultivated, can be integrity when it's established, can be article when it's promulgated, and can be handwriting when it's moved." Calligraphy is the movement of the heart, and the mind is the primary while everything is secondary, which magnifies the expression and expressive functions of calligraphy to the extreme. This should be influenced by Wang Yangming's "mind study". In the Ming Dynasty, the calligraphy theory ushered in a clear turn, from "following nature" to "mind dominance", and reflected in the theory of function, it is from "exterior" to "interior", paying more attention to the role of people themselves.

Calligraphy creates aesthetic objects, which is similar to drawing theory and poetic theory in ancient Chinese aesthetics. It is attributed to "imagery", and it is very common in some expositions of the Qing Dynasty. For example, Liu Xizai said in the chapter *Overview of Calligraphy of Overview of Art*: "Meaning, which is innate, is the foundation of calligraphy; image, which is acquired, is the function of calligraphy." Here it clearly pointed out the object created by calligraphy art, with the content layer of "meaning" and the form layer of "image", which has the characteristics of art objects, and its pure artistry and aesthetics are fully revealed. Zhou Xinglian said in *Insights by the Side of Pool*: "So the writing is the drawing of the mind. If you can only put the shape of things, but can't convey the mind, you will lose both the meaning of drawing and writing." He tried to combine the "following nature" and "expression" of calligraphy to balance the functions of "interior" and "exterior". After the Qing

Dynasty, aesthetic masterpieces appeared, and the discussion on the function of calligraphy in calligraphy theory also had a variety of perspectives, with a trend of integration. From exterior viewing to introspection, the ontology of calligraphy is obscured in the consciousness of aesthetics. The dimension of "natural writing" tends to be hidden, while the dimension of "visual art" is gradually emerging.

#### 4.3 Cultural Mediation And The Social Life Of Literati

Since the direct object created by calligraphy is characters, and characters are a bridge of communication, calligraphy also has a natural function of information communication. Xiao Yan said in *Cursive Script* that "In the past Qin Dynasty, the princes competed for the leadership, passing official documents by post with beacons, but the seal script and clerical script are too difficult to write speedily, so they made special calligraphy for emergency." Information communication needs to be efficient. Therefore, this practical feature of calligraphy actually deviates from its artistry. However, the function of information communication has created the important social value of calligraphy as a cultural intermediary bridge.

Whether the impetuosity in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the popularity of Tang poetry and Song Ci, or the rise of opera in the Ming Dynasty on the desks of literati, all need to rely on calligraphy for recording and communication. Without calligraphy, the communication between literati would lose an important channel, and the transmission of culture to later generations would be almost impossible. Therefore, the cultural environment, the gestation and development of scholar-bureaucrat culture in ancient China are inseparable from calligraphy. At the same time, calligraphy, as an independent art, adds color to the overall atmosphere of this scholar culture, and is itself an important component of scholar culture.

In addition to the communication function, the art of calligraphy is actually a means for artists and literati to carry out social activities. In *Elegant Debt: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming*, the British scholar Craig Clunas discussed the important role of calligraphy and drawing works as a social means in Wen Zhengming's art. Among them, Wen Zhengming's calligraphy works, drawing calligraphy and other "gifts" in the field of calligraphy have become an important medium for Wen Zhengming to successfully communicate with people such as officials, geography, teachers, peers, customers and disciples. Craig said in the preface: "But every text that Wen Zhengming wrote, every letter, every funerary text, preface or poem, was in its origins also a work of calligraphy, even if the

original object does not survive today, and all we have is a printed recension of the content.

As surviving examples by other famous Ming cultural figures show, such a text was also a thing, usually in the form of a scroll of paper, which passed from a giver to a recipient, carrying with it part of the personal substance of that donor (Clunas, 2004). Independent calligraphy works, inscriptions and postscripts on drawings are the forms of calligraphy art which not only reflect the social interactions of literati, but also objectively lead to the spread and historical transmission of calligraphy culture in various social classes. In the friendship between literati, the "natural writing" dimension and the "visual art" dimension of calligraphy have become indistinguishable from each other. Calligraphy is not only an act of "natural writing" but also an activity of "visual art". There is a tension between these two dimensions, which shapes the preservation and distribution of calligraphy in different historical periods, and also provides sustained dynamics in the realization of social functions of calligraphy. The instrumental value and aesthetic value of calligraphy are also unified in such a dynamic process, becoming a part of enlightenment ethics, interpersonal communication and spiritual life. Although the two dimensions coexist, the ontology of calligraphy is unitary, and its essence is an act of "natural writing". From the original forms of calligraphy such as oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, and stone drum inscriptions to the aesthetic consciousness of calligraphy in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the "visual art" dimension of calligraphy gradually emerged and became clear, but the ontology of "natural writing" has never changed or been absent. Calligraphy in the Tang Dynasty matured until the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The "visual art" dimension of calligraphy gradually covered the ontology of "natural writing", but "natural writing" was always primary, and the "visual art" dimension was derived from this human behavior.

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