

Calligraphy and Culture Cultivation

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Abstract

Though big accomplishments, after a long swell of enthusiasm, have been made for Chinese calligraphy, various potential risks still exist in it. The author carries a serious sense of crisis about the circle of Chinese calligraphy today, especially about the absence of traditional culture in the process of Chinese calligraphy modernization. Based on the perspective of culture cultivation, the author starts to believe that the methods of “be moral”, “be informative” and “be a professional of calligraphy” proposed by master Xu Wuwen is a panacea to cure the diseases tormenting calligraphy circle today.

Key words: Calligraphy; Culture; Cultivation

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INTRODUCTION

Wuwen once warned his students, “having morality, learning and professional qualities, you can expect to be a master”. Today so many calligraphers call themselves masters. Are they worth the name? A youngster who is visionary and persistent would be enlightened sooner or later.” Master Wuwen has an encyclopedic mind, sparkling eyes and a long vision. He led his followers with his own practice and wisdom; he pointed out the right direction for China’s modern calligraphy; his visionary sight will last forever and present new charm as time goes by.

1. THE DEFICIENCY OF CALLIGRAPHY CULTURE IN TODAY’S CHINA

Today, the practitioners in the circle are eagerly hoping a flourishing phase with a batch of classical works and great calligraphers who can keep abreast with the big names. On the one hand, we are in a good time with the fast-growing economy and rejuvenating traditional Chinese culture which is the root of Chinese calligraphy; On the other hand, a large number of reference books have been found and all kinds of aesthetic concepts have been introduced, which are enriching the way of expression gradually. Calligraphy has been popular for over thirty years. Thanks to the joint effects of generations of peers, calligraphy in China now is extraordinary prosperous. There are an increasing number of calligraphy activities like exhibition and publishing being held, providing more and more platforms for calligraphy fans and relevant staff to show their own talents and skills. Today, calligraphy cities, towns and villages named by Chinese Calligraphers Association are springing up like mushrooms, also, calligraphy organizations and calligraphy art institutions are being popular in a way never seen before. Not only many ministries of China found calligraphy associations, but variety of sociables, studios and workshops sprang up. The whole society is getting crazy about calligraphy. However, under this superficial prosperity, we should slow down and introspect what is going wrong in the process of China’s calligraphy modernization and wake up to the reality that many problems pop up while we are pleased with its good sides. The most typical one is nothing else than culture omission.

2. TO CULTIVATE CULTURAL AWARENESS

The word “culture”, listed in Grand Chinese Dictionary, has four implications: (a) to have the subject study, (b) the

ability to use languages and letters and the knowledge of books, (c) the sum total of material and spiritual wealth created by human beings in the process of social and historical practice. Sometimes, spiritual wealth, says, education, science, literature and art etc., (d) archaeology terminology, which means a complex of ruins, relics without a setting location in the same period of time. Usually, the same tools, utensils, and manufacturing technology were used, which feature the identity of the culture. For instance, Yangshao Culture; Longshan Culture.¹ In our context, the word “culture” is defined in both a broad sense and in a narrow sense. Culture in the broad sense, a concept defined on philosophical level, is the antithesis of “nature, originality”, namely the sum of all process and results of human changing the world according to their will and nature.

Culture in a narrow sense, is an antithesis of “economy”, “politics”, referring in particular to the culture in spiritual life, namely, the ways, process and results of the society’s spirit generation and of the spiritual life, e.g., studies on philosophy, society and science, innovation of literature and arts, scientific education, press and publishing, mass media, leisure and recreation and so forth. In brief, culture in narrow a sense means “people’s living model represented by characters, languages, symbols and spirits”.

Culture is so complicated that it has numerous shapes. But as a living model peculiar to humans, it has a universal and sustained nature and orientation, which is also called humanization, the nature of changing the world into the one fitting human’s nature; meanwhile, “humanization” is also fit for describing human beings themselves. “Humanization of humans” equals to “educating people”—to breed, shape and improve humans with physical and spiritual fruits harvested from the practice of changing the world—so as to turn humans into real beings in realistic value. The sum of all models and results of humanization and educating people is the essence and core of broad-sensed culture. This essence and core exists, lives, penetrates, manifests in every single field, form and level of social life, composing all inherent characteristics of human behaviors.

Today there is a trend that everyone is talking about culture, tea culture, wine culture, diet culture—you name it. Needless to say, calligraphy itself is a culture. But the “cultures” that are popular today are not the real culture indeed, most of which just put on a culture label or deem culture as a diploma or certificate of award. These so-called cultures are no better than tools used to chase profits. Then, what is real culture? The author believes, informally, culture is a vision, a taste, an experience, or a certain state, a comprehensive quality of combining all techniques and skills together.

¹ The Grand Chinese Dictionary Compiling department, the Editorial Board of *Grand Chinese Dictionary* (1986). China: Shanghai Lexicographic Publishing House.

Management science is one of the greatest contributions humans made to the world in the last century. One of its branch subject, military management, proposed a new concept: culture cultivation. In military, there are sayings like formative education, apprenticeship training, habit developing, work style and discipline, and so forth. Military needs to cultivate culture, so does the enterprises, the Chinese Communist Party (as is indicated by Liu Shaoqi in the paper *On Cultivation of The CCP*), and the calligraphy.

The tradition of “culture cultivation” in China has a long history. Confucian school and Taoist school both proposed “culture cultivation”. So, culture cultivation is a magic code for intellectuals to practice their personalities, and also a spiritual heritage presented to the later generations. Mencius, the important figure in the Confucian School, once stated “to diminish your lust is a good method to cultivate your mind. A person with less lust, although he/she has an imperfect nature, is still a good figure by nature. On the contrary, a person with more lust, although he/she possesses a better nature, is still with big defective.” Mencius said, “I am good at cultivating my quality of righteousness and morality”. He also said, “Those who have moralities can teach those who have not; those whose ability are better can teach those whose are worse.”² When Zhu Xi added a note to Mencius, he said,

Doing no harm to others and making few mistakes are called morality; being able to achieve big by his or her talent is called ability. Putting a man without morality and ability in an extraordinarily good environment, and wait the rebirth of the man with both good morality and ability. (Zhu, 2004)

To wait means to take some time; rebirth means transforming himself towards a positive direction. According to Mencius, to understand moderation needs cultivation, to achieve something big needs moderation as well. Cultivation should be integrated with just and proper method, otherwise it will become corrupt.

The concept of cultivation, provided by Mencius and followers afterwards, is deeply related with “mindness” and “temperament”, what’s more, this concept is highlighted in Wei and Jin dynasties (265B.C.-589B.C.) “Wei-Jin style or Wei-Jin temperament is the crystal through cultivation of energy, temperament, and spirit of the celebrities in that time.” Ji Kang, the scholar in the time, once expressed in his book, *On Keeping Fit*,

a person with wits understands that one’s body, relying on his spirit, can stand upright, and one’s spirit, residing in his body, can exist. What’s more, life can be lost easily, and knowing a mistake poses a threat to one’s health. So one needs to cultivate his spirit by the way of taming his temperament, and strong his body through stabilizing his mindness.

The object world, may harm one’s mindness, should be expelled from his mind. And Energy, because of a tranquil

² Mencius. (1987). Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House.

mood, could be in full. One, wiping out all anxieties, should have an open-mind, and keep a good mood after dislodging all selfishness. Additionally, combining quietism of art to keep energy with the uprightness of heaven and earth to nature oneself and practicing them continuously are the reflection of the way of nature. So, the cultivation of mindness, spirit, and temperament is the mirror of celebrities' personalities in the period. The style of Seven Sages of Metaphysics models the Chinese offspring.

Calligraphy is peculiar to China. Compared to other forms of art, its unique features lie in its relation to culture as well as with learning and cultivation. So calligraphers need to learn the skill of "cultivation" from the celebrities in Wei-Jin period, not only in the respects of "mindness", "spirit", and "temperament", but, more importantly, to develop a "cultural awareness". Xu Wuwen, Our teacher of the older generation, held an incisive understanding of it, "Our unique calligraphy and seal cutting are brewed in thousands of years of culture and history, just as Luzhou wine must come out from old wine cellar." (Xu, 2003) Though the teacher didn't use "cultivation" to explain his understanding, he was actually talking about no other than the cultivation of calligraphy. Calligraphy is the accumulation of culture. Any choice avoiding the difficult and taking the easy will never touch the essence of calligraphy except for short-term honors and benefits. Lao Tzu said "An expert in building will never build a building whose foundation is not solid". Scanning the calligraphy circle prosperous for thirty years, it's odd that there are lots of people who have excellent techniques, but, seldom breathtaking masterpiece has been created. Someone is pleased with criticizing the techniques of old masters; others know incredible skills and styles, but they don't know how to combine all these together; and some famous calligraphers are possessed by the devil, whose new works are purely jokes. Don't works of these calligraphers manifest their unbalance of yin and yang? The lack of masters in today's calligraphy circle is not the result of lacking techniques, but is due to lack of cultural cultivation. Culture is not advertised by diplomas and certificates, and is not represented by reciting a couple of Tang Poems and Song Poems; instead, it should be based on China's five thousand years' traditional civilization and on the studies relevant to it. It is a golden mountain in the cultural world. The best way to gain the resources is to develop a set of long vision, good taste and ability of combining.

So, how to cultivate the culture for calligraphy? Wuwen once warned his students, "having morality, learning and professional qualities, you can expect to be a master". Today so many calligraphers call themselves masters. Are they worth the name? A youngster who is visionary and persistent would be enlightened sooner or later."³ Master Wuwen has an encyclopedic mind, sparkling eyes and a long vision. He led his followers with his own

practice and wisdom; he pointed out the right direction for China's modern calligraphy; his visionary sight will last forever and present new charm as time goes by.

2.1 Be Professional

In the past thirty years of popularity of calligraphy, people have rediscovered and restudied the classics, and have driven out the ugly, the dirty and the vulgar contaminating the circle. Exactly as what Mr. Zuan Zhang said, "Some young calligraphers today, really are doing an excellent job, except for their works giving you a feeling of lack of identity." I admire the "clear, thick, peculiar, old" writing style proposed by Mr Zhang. In my view, the modern calligraphy never lacks clear-and-thick style; what it lacks is the peculiar-and-old one. More calligraphers don't dig the deep meaning of the culture behind the works; instead, they employ a simple and mechanic method to express the variegated writing technique, turning the classics into mediocre works. The pursuit of "visual impact" has not only damaged our sense of formality, and passivated our visual perception, but also is rapidly destroying the traditional beauty such as connotation, implication, images beyond images and so forth." (Zhang, 2003)

2.2 Be Learned

A calligrapher, who is mastery in many writing techniques but neglects traditional culture and international competition sense, would never become a master of calligraphy. The relations between "cultural awareness" and "techniques", far from the two wings to a bird or two feet to a person, is regarded as soil to wood and grass or water source to the long river. So a calligrapher, intending to make a masterpiece, is daydreaming without profound cultural awareness. As the proverb says "the reed on the wall looks heavy, but shallow in root; mountain bamboo shoot seems thick outside, but empty inside". Even a skillful calligrapher, without the back of knowledge, will definitely like a shallow-rooted reed or empty-inside bamboo. Thus, tutor Wuwen said, "He should not be satisfied with the knowledge he has learned on calligraphy and seal cutting", "To master it, he should persist in learning, or he should descend to a worker who knows nothing but writing", "The reason why the original distinguish itself from its copies lies in their spirits"; "Creativity and appreciation of writing works never go beyond the followings: stippling, structure, composition, and spirit represented by the first three"; "From this perspective, spirit is not reproducible. Spirits differ in level, elegance, created through one's morality, learning and knowledge rather than through the characters only". He believed the highest state of creation is innovation: "Innovation is to create a model work"; "innovation is to create works according to calligraphy rules." (Xu, 2003)

2.3 Be Moral

Chinese culture has a tradition of giving priority to morality. As the Analects of Confucius (in the chapter of Shu Er) goes, the scholar Confucius teaches someone,

³ A writing scroll as a gift to me from master Xu Wuwen

he always put attention on four aspects: cultural awareness, conduct, loyalty, and truthfulness. Cited in the book, the Interpretation of Analects, written by Huang Kan, the famous Four Aspects were intensively used by Confucius, so those Four were named Four Teachings. Li Chong, another scholar, stated “cultural awareness is originated from the book, conduct with respecting to relatives, loyalty from subject to Majesty, and truthfulness from making friends.” Those Four were the priorities when teaching. The Four Aspects, listed by Confucius, especially the former Three are closely tied with morality, which fully reflects that Confucius School eyes inner cultivation. Also, Confucius seeking virtue can be detected in other chapters, say, “the Lord should be faithful, and follower righteous, which is virtue”, “governing the people by means of virtue and control them with propriety”, and “setting the highest goal, and dealing the relationship morally”, and so on. So the concept “morality” is in a crucial part of Confucius School, and it is not only the basic requirement and rule for a person, but also the to govern the country, the clues of which can be found in Confucius’ sayings. Additionally, the followers to Confucius strove for cultivation of morality, like Zen Zi, who could kill a pig instead of cheating his son, and Zi Lu, who never break his promise to the friend. To select an official was followed by the system named recommendatory in the gap between Pre-Qin hereditary system and imperial exam system, and the core of recommendatory is morality. The subjects of this exam include “Fealty and Integrity, Gifted Scholar, Integrity, Four Good Manners (gentle, simple, modesty, thrifty), Uprightness, Filial Piety and Good Farmhand, Understanding of Scriptures, Knowing Laws, Comprehending Yin & Yang, Bravery and Learning Martial Arts, and so on”, in which the subjects like “Fealty and Integrity”, “Integrity”, “Four Good Manners”, “Uprightness”, and “Filial Piety and Good Farmhand” have tied with checking the morality. So morality, as a standard to assess a governor, is critical to that time.

Mencius said, “Establishing the core status of heart can ensure the proper functions of other organs subordinated to it”.⁴ It is a good testament that the works of those who had moral defects in history never past to today; An immorality calligrapher whose work is difficult to be traced, and Qin Hui, the lack-moral office in Song Dynasty, is a vivid illustration. According to Imperial Collection Four, “the three words, Jade Rabbit Spring, on the handrail in the Nan Jing Confucius Temple inscribed by Qin Hui were very beautiful”, which fully reflects he is a good calligrapher, but as an notorious official who

trapped good ones, he and his works would definitely in a lower position. In contrast, to the works of those with morality, people always show respect. So good works and personalities can mutually promote, both of which can be cherished by offspring.

“Take master Hongyi for example. His works probably wouldn’t win others so much in terms of techniques, but his morality is reflected between lines.” (Xu, 2003) Master Wuwen thus told us, “morality is of high importance and will reflect among the words.”

CONCLUSION

Making a general survey of generations of calligraphy masters, we find a fact that none of them were not bred in the nourishment of traditional culture, which in turn represented his or her comprehensive competency. In Song Dynasty, Su Shi, Huang Tingjian and Mi Fu were all outstanding calligraphers, of which Mi Fu undoubtedly ranked first, while Cold Food in Huangzhou of Su Dongpo was the No.1 calligraphy works, which proved the fact again that best techniques itself can hardly create top-class works alone. Chairman Mao once said “In the battle against North Korea, the Chinese People’s Volunteers beat American invaders with their spirit and courage. Americans had more advanced weapons than spirits, so they lost.” (Wang & Peng, 2011) In fact, culture cultivation itself contains cultural elements. Be it military, enterprise, party or construction, all needs two kinds of strength: material strength and spiritual one. Just as Clausewitz said, “Material cause and result are nothing else but a knife handle, while the spiritual ones are metal and edge.” (Clausewitz, 2013) The victory comes from joint results of all these effects, but the determinant is people with spirit. It’s true for war, so it is for calligraphy.

In short, only by following the guidance of the three rules, practicing and learning calmly, driving out all fickleness, and absorbing nutrition from the essence of traditional culture can we reach the peak of calligraphy of our time. We’re looking forward, in the near future, that classic works and masters will appear without failing our expectation.

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⁴ Mencius. (1987). Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House.