

A Study on the Cultural Connotations and Contemporary Inheritance of Chinese Calligraphy Art from the Perspective of Taoist Thought

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Abstract. Chinese calligraphy is a treasure of Chinese culture, and its development is closely related to philosophical thought, especially Taoist thought. This study aims to systematically explore the profound cultural connotations of Chinese calligraphy and its contemporary transmission path from the perspective of Taoist thought. This paper first traces the historical origins of Taoist core concepts such as "nature," "non-action," and "yin and yang" with the art of calligraphy, explaining their convergence in spiritual essence. This paper advocates upholding the aesthetic core of Taoism to solidify the cultural foundation; promotes the integration of contemporary elements to expand dissemination channels; and seeks to build a long-term mechanism to overcome the current difficulties in inheritance. This study aims to deepen the philosophical understanding of calligraphy and provide theoretical reference and practical inspiration for the contemporary revitalization and sustainable development of this traditional art. This paper finds that the core ideas of Taoism and calligraphy are deeply aligned in their spiritual essence, serving as key support for their cultural connotations. The conclusion is that integrating contemporary elements with Taoist aesthetics can effectively promote the contemporary inheritance of calligraphy.

Keywords: Taoist Thought, Chinese Calligraphy, Cultural Connotation, Contemporary Inheritance

1. Introduction

Taoism is one of the core schools of thought in traditional Chinese philosophy, with concepts such as "Tao follows nature" and "existence and non-existence give rise to each other" at its core. Chinese calligraphy, as an art form that integrates writing and aesthetic expression, carries rich cultural genes. Current academic research on calligraphy largely focuses on Confucian perspectives or the transmission of techniques, while systematic exploration of the deep connection between Taoist thought and calligraphy, as well as its contemporary transformation, remains insufficient. To fill this gap, this paper explores the cultural origins of calligraphy and Taoist thought, the embodiment of Taoist concepts in the form and content of calligraphy, and the path of calligraphy inheritance and innovation based on Taoist thought. This study employs literature analysis, textual interpretation, and case study methods. The motivation for this research stems from the dual challenges faced by

traditional calligraphy art in the context of globalization and the digital age: insufficient motivation for inheritance and unclear paths for innovation. This paper aims to systematically trace the cultural origins of calligraphy and Taoism, analyzing the artistic manifestations of Taoist thought from both external form and internal spirit perspectives. Finally, it explores effective paths for its contemporary development from three dimensions: inheritance, innovation, and safeguarding. This research not only deepens our understanding of the core of calligraphy culture but also provides theoretical support for the modern dissemination of calligraphy, and has practical significance for promoting the contemporary transformation of the traditional aesthetic spirit.

2. The cultural origins of Chinese calligraphy and Taoist thought

Chinese calligraphy is not only an art of writing characters, but also deeply integrated with Taoist philosophy (such as "nature" and "non-action"), serving as a concrete expression of Taoist thought in the artistic field. This study clarifies the core tenets of Taoist thought and the development of Chinese calligraphy, and delves into the symbiotic relationship in which the two have mutually influenced and nourished each other throughout history.

2.1. The core connotation of Taoist thought

- The Way of Nature: "The Way" is the origin of the universe, and "nature" refers to the inherent laws of things. It advocates that people should follow the nature of things and abandon deliberate manipulation (such as not forcibly interfering with nature or others).

- Governing by non-action: It is not "doing nothing", but "not acting recklessly" - following the laws and guiding the trend, while eliminating selfish desires (for example, reducing harsh policies in politics and returning to simplicity in personal cultivation).

- Tranquility and gentleness: Using water as a metaphor (the highest good is like water), it advocates maintaining gentleness, tranquility, and humility. It believes that softness contains powerful vitality, and a state of emptiness and tranquility is the foundation for understanding the "Tao".

- Qi Wu Xiaoyao (Zhuangzi): Pursuing spiritual freedom, believing that all things are equal at the level of "Dao", advocating transcending worldly judgments of right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, and reaching a carefree state of "forgetting both self and things".

- Dialectical thinking: It holds that things are a unity of opposites and mutually transformative (e.g., "misfortune and fortune are interdependent"), and advocates for a dynamic and comprehensive view of issues [1].

2.2. The historical lineage and artistic characteristics of calligraphy

2.2.1. Historical context

The historical transmission of calligraphy was founded in the pre-Qin and Han dynasties. The natural simplicity of oracle bone script and bronze script, the order and purity of lines in seal script, and the "breaking of roundness into squareness" in the clerical script revolution opened up a new freedom of expression in brush and ink. The Wei and Jin dynasties showcased the self-awareness and maturity of calligraphic techniques. Scholar-calligraphers, represented by Wang Xizhi, regarded calligraphy as an expression of their personal style and interests. Their works, "floating like clouds and soaring like dragons," perfectly embodied the natural and unrestrained Taoist spirit. The Tang and Song dynasties showcased the rules and artistic conception of calligraphy. Tang dynasty regular

script was strictly structured, embodying the ultimate balance of Yin and Yang; while Tang dynasty cursive script (such as that of Zhang Xu and Huai Su) was unrestrained and free, reaching a state of "non-action" in creation. The Song dynasty's "expressive" style of calligraphy (such as that of Su Shi and Mi Fu) emphasized personal temperament and natural writing, consistent with the Daoist idea of "valuing spirit over form." Calligraphers from the Yuan, Ming, Qing, and later periods continued to explore individuality and expressiveness while inheriting tradition.

2.2.2. Artistic features

The artistic characteristic of calligraphy lies in its abstract, metaphysical nature. Calligraphy does not directly depict objects, but rather expresses emotions and philosophical principles through lines and space, which resonates with the Taoist concept of "the great image has no form." The vitality of the lines pursues techniques such as "penetrating the paper" and "drawing with a cone in sand," imbuing abstract lines with a sense of life, like sinews and flesh. It also possesses a concept of emptiness, treating white space as black: calligraphy not only focuses on ink marks (black) but also values blank space (white). The white space between characters and lines is where the "energy" flows in the work, a direct manifestation of the Taoist idea of "the mutual generation of existence and non-existence."

2.3. The historical connection between calligraphy and Taoist thought

The rise of Taoism in the late Eastern Han Dynasty and the philosophical discussions of the Wei and Jin Dynasties made Taoist thought an important part of the spiritual world of literati and officials. Calligraphy, as an essential skill for scholars, naturally became their artistic path to understanding and comprehending the Tao. Calligraphers drew inspiration from nature (such as Zhang Xu observing Gongsun Da Nian's sword dance and Huaisu observing Xia Yun's enlightenment in cursive script), pursuing "natural beauty" in their works. The creative state of a calligrapher emphasizes "intention preceding the brush" and "forgetting oneself and the external world," requiring the elimination of distractions, following the flow of the brush, and aligning with the Taoist state of mind of "not acting recklessly" and "attaining utmost emptiness and maintaining steadfast stillness [2]."

- The Aesthetic of Softness Overcoming Strength: The lines written with a soft brush are "soft on the outside but firm on the inside," and the varying shades and textures of ink embody a dialectical beauty, echoing the Daoist ideas of "valuing softness" and "reversal is the movement of the Dao."
- The Pursuit of Freedom and Artistic Conception: The "refined" style of calligraphy (the highest aesthetic standard) emphasizes "capturing the spirit rather than the form, returning to simplicity," aligning with Zhuangzi's spirit of "freedom and ease"; the artistic charm and ethereal quality of the work are a manifestation of the Daoist concept of "equality of all things [3]."

3. The embodiment of Taoist thought in the art form of calligraphy

The Taoist spirit in calligraphy seeks a state of naturalness and spontaneity. Brushstrokes are unforced, flowing like clouds and water; the structure emphasizes balance, with appropriate density and sparseness, just as all things in the world strive for symmetry and harmony. In terms of layout, blank space and ink marks are equally important, creating a balance between emptiness and fullness. Ultimately, it allows the writer to enter a relaxed state where technique is forgotten, mind and hand are in harmony, allowing the most genuine emotions to flow naturally from the tip of the brush.

3.1. The Taoist connotations (external) in calligraphy

In the external form of calligraphy, Taoist thought is primarily manifested through visible elements such as brushstrokes, character structure, and composition. Its core is the visual presentation of the principles of "Tao follows nature" and "Yin-Yang dialectics." The "non-action" and "naturalness" in brushwork: Taoism opposes deliberate artifice and pursues "great skill appearing clumsy." In brushwork, this is reflected in the imitation of natural phenomena such as "leaking roof marks," "drawing with a cone in sand," and "broken hairpin." The writing emphasizes the harmonious flow of mind and hand, following the natural flow to achieve a state of "unintentional beauty," which embodies the spirit of "wuwei" (non-action). Structure is the "spatial sense" of dialectical thinking; the structure of characters pursues "unity of opposites": the interplay of "emptiness and fullness" in composition reflects the Daoist belief that "existence and non-existence give rise to each other." In the overall layout (composition), the "black" ink and the "white" blank space are equally important. These "empty" areas are channels for the flow of energy, complementing the "full" ink to form a vibrant and organic whole, the so-called "treating white as black," creating an ethereal and profound artistic conception [4].

3.2. The Taoist spirit (inner essence) within calligraphy

The "Emptiness and Stillness" of the Creative Mindset: Taoism advocates "attaining utmost emptiness and maintaining steadfast stillness." Before creating calligraphy, the calligrapher must cleanse their mind, eliminating distracting thoughts and utilitarian desires, entering a state of clear and tranquil spirit. Only in this state of "emptiness and stillness" can the artist's spirituality and the brushstrokes of the subject perfectly blend, allowing natural inspiration to flourish, so that the lines flowing from the brush can directly reach the essence, full of vitality (lively spirit and rhythm). Aesthetics: The "Realm" of Freedom and Unfettered Spirit [5].

The highest aesthetic ideal in calligraphy, the "Yipin" (逸品), pursues "capturing the spirit rather than the form, returning to simplicity and authenticity" (like Su Shi's calligraphy, which is "natural and unrestrained," without deliberate craftsmanship). This corresponds to the Daoist concept of "freedom and ease"—transcending worldly standards of beauty and ugliness, valuing natural authenticity as beauty. The "Yipin" and "Fang" (放) in the realm of life: Daoism pursues individual spiritual freedom and liberation. In calligraphy, this gives rise to the aesthetic style of the "Yipin." The "subtlety" and "restraint" in style and taste: Consistent with the profound mystery of the Dao, the power of excellent calligraphy works is often not outwardly displayed, but rather contained within the lines, pursuing a hidden strength, an unstoppable inner power.

4. Contemporary inheritance and innovation of calligraphy art based on Taoist philosophy

The contemporary inheritance of calligraphy based on Taoist philosophy emphasizes inheriting the core concepts of "nature" and "tranquility." Innovation requires integrating contemporary elements such as digital media to expand dissemination channels. Simultaneously, a long-term mechanism that coordinates policy and market forces is needed to revitalize this ancient art in the modern era [6].

4.1. Inheritance dimension

With the Taoist concepts of "nature" and "emptiness and stillness" at their core, this philosophy integrates classics such as the Tao Te Ching into calligraphy education, guiding learners to

understand brush techniques through natural objects. Combined with "Taoist calligraphy study tours," this approach strengthens cultural foundations from both cognitive and practical perspectives.

- Deepen ideological education: Integrate the study of classics such as the *Tao Te Ching* into calligraphy teaching, guiding students to understand aesthetic principles such as "nature" and "emptiness and fullness."
- Emphasize cultivation and practice: Cultivate a state of "emptiness and tranquility" through elegant gatherings and meditation, achieving "cultivation leading to skill," and elevating the creative realm.
- Promote living inheritance: Encourage apprenticeship systems to preserve the understanding and insights into the meaning of brush and ink and the spirit of Taoism.

4.2. Innovation dimension

With Taoist philosophy at its core, this initiative crosses boundaries with modern design and leverages digital technology, launching new media campaigns to broaden its dissemination channels. It develops experiential apps and short videos to dynamically showcase the "wuwei ziran" (non-action, naturalness) writing process, enhancing its appeal. Expanding application scenarios: Taoist-style calligraphy is integrated into cultural and creative products and modern design, bridging traditional aesthetics with modern life. Updating the language of expression: Utilizing modern narrative methods such as exhibitions and multimedia, it reconstructs the public's understanding and resonance with Taoist calligraphy [7].

4.3. Guarantee dimension

Establish a special fund: Include heritage projects with clear Taoist aesthetic characteristics within the scope of intangible cultural heritage support. Build a heritage platform: Create heritage bases integrating creation, display, and education, fostering an immersive cultural environment. Promote social collaboration: Encourage social capital participation, forming a virtuous cycle of "promoting industry through culture and supporting culture through industry" through cultural and creative development and cultural tourism integration.

5. Conclusion

This article explores the cultural connotations and contemporary inheritance paths of Chinese calligraphy art from the perspective of Taoist thought. The research shows that the core Taoist ideas of "following the natural way" and "emptiness, stillness, and non-action" not only shape the rhythm and blank space of calligraphy's external form, but also internalize into the spiritual core of "unity of man and calligraphy" in calligraphy creation. The historical connection between the two is an important component of the cultural genes of calligraphy. This study also has certain limitations, such as the lack of in-depth comparison of the differences in the influence of Taoist thought on different calligraphic styles, and the absence of empirical research on public acceptance. Future research could explore these aspects in more detail, and further verify and optimize inheritance strategies through quantitative analysis, thereby promoting the revitalization of this ancient art in the new era.

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