

Research Article

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Calligraphic Iconology on Literature: The Image Relationship Between Language Art and Writing Art

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Abstract: Calligraphic icon differs from general artistic images, such as portraits, as it does not directly imitate objects but rather presents a distinct form of comparison in calligraphy. The predominant rhetorical pattern in Chinese calligraphic theory is the “analogical icon”, which encapsulates the essence of calligraphic art by juxtaposing language imagery with visual representations. This inseparable link between literature and calligraphic icon forms the philosophical foundation of the “calligraphic iconology”. In the realm of theory, writing renders language visible, giving rise to the possibility of looking at calligraphic iconology from a phenomenological perspective and the subsequent development of the “image and background relationship” method within this domain. The “calligraphic icon” serves as the fundamental subject of inquiry within the field, presenting both the focal point and challenge for the “theory of calligraphic iconology” and representing a novel area ready for continuous exploration.

Keywords: literature; calligraphic icons; imitation; analogical icons

The “literary iconology” encompasses both “calligraphic iconology”, with the latter emerging as a distinct field for study and discussion. While the former, exploring the relationship between literature and images, enjoys recognition within the academic community, the latter warrants further examination. Though “calligraphic icons” are a form of literary image, they differ significantly from typical literary images like poem or novel illustrations, primarily consisting of static hand-drawings.¹ While the

¹ The concept of “painting images” in this paper, as opposed to “calligraphic images”, is intended to distinguish between two very different kinds of literary images. “Painting images” also include woodcuts, which are also hand-drawn and then engraved.

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assessment that the disparity between “calligraphical images” and “painting images” is apparent relies solely on superficial visual experiences, overlooking deeper underlying issues yet to be fully explored in academia. Throughout the history of Chinese art criticism, discussions on “the shared origins, essence, and methods of calligraphy and paintings” have been prevalent, yet the unique characteristics of calligraphic icons and their critique have often been neglected. Preliminary research indicates that interpreting this issue is crucial, involving intricate theories such as the relationship between language and imagery. Such interpretation not only highlights the distinctiveness of “calligraphic iconology” but also provides insight into why it serves as another gateway to understanding the arts.

1 The Art of Writing Is Not Immitation

The theory of imitation, also known as the reproduction theory or reflection theory, is fundamental in art history and continues to exert significant influence. It asserts that art’s relationship with the real world is one of regeneration, with art imitating, reproducing, or reflecting elements of nature, society, and humanity. This perspective suggests that the physical reality serves as the primary subject for artistic imitation. While art may seem to imitate non-physical aspects like thoughts and emotions, these abstract concepts are often represented through tangible objects. Without such tangible representations, art risks becoming a mere conduit for ideological concepts and emotional slogans, straying from its essence and falling into the realm of “non-art”. Therefore, the discipline of art necessitates that objects serve as both carriers and direct subjects of artistic imitation. This principle forms the cornerstone of the classical theory of imitation, particularly evident in realistic paintings, which epitomize the reflection of the physical world. In essence, the theory of imitation is indispensable and indisputable, particularly in painting and other pictorial arts. It underscores the fundamental principle that objects of imitation and reproduction primarily derive from the physical world, embodying the essence of classical artistic theory.

If this is the case, what can be done by applying this theory to explain the art of writing—calligraphy, and to propose or construct an aesthetics of calligraphy? Is it equally valid and unquestionable? Liu Gangji, in *A Brief Introduction to the Aesthetics of Calligraphy* (1979), contends that calligraphy, like other forms of literature and art, emerges from the calligrapher’s reflection on the beauty of form and dynamics in real life (Liu 2006, p. 6).

In the writing of Chinese characters, each point and stroke form a shape that, while not an exact replica of real-life objects, bears a resemblance to them. For example, a point may resemble a stone, and a stroke may evoke the image of a sharp

knife. This notion forms the basis of the “reflection theory of calligraphy”, which posits that the forms created in calligraphy, like those in other art forms, imitate and replicate aspects of the physical world. It is precisely because the writing of Chinese characters with dots and strokes is able to create a variety of forms that are similar to real-life forms that when we face these forms, just as when we face real-life forms, there is a feeling of beauty or unattractiveness (Liu 2006, pp. 6-7). According to his theory, the “forms of characters” (or calligraphic icons), akin to other art forms, serve as a representation and reproduction of the physical reality. The distinction between “calligraphic images” and “painting images” lies in their visual experience, with the former emphasizing calligraphy’s unique characteristics in imitating the physical world.

In discussing the similarity between the “form of characters” and the real world, Mr. Liu overlooks the subjectivity inherent in interpretation. While he sees a point (丶) as resembling a stone and a stroke (丿) as akin to a sharp knife, others might perceive the same characters differently. For instance, what Mr. Liu views as a point resembling a stone might appear to others as a drop of water, and what he sees as a stroke resembling a sharp knife might be interpreted by others as a windswept ribbon. This variability in perception illustrates that such “similarity” is subjective and lacks the objective stipulation of physical resemblance.² Unlike paintings, where distinctions between objects like a “stone” and a “drop of water” or a “sharp knife” and a “ribbon” are clearly delineated on the canvas, the subjective associations triggered by calligraphy can blur such boundaries. Even if there were illusions or visual errors, vastly different portraits wouldn’t be confused. It seems Mr. Liu conflated the imitation of objects in painting with the subjective associations evoked by calligraphy, failing to distinguish between the two. This confusion arises from his rigid adherence to the theory of reflection as a universal law, leading to a misrepresentation of the text due to a lack of clarity regarding the nature of the object.

Why doesn’t the theory of reflection (imitation theory) apply to calligraphy? To understand this, we must return to Aristotle’s “four causes”. The concept of “imitation” in the material reflection theory originates from Aristotle,³ and the “four causes”, rooted in the physical world, form the philosophical foundation of his theory

2 The “thing” as a visual object is tangible, and although it may change and break, it is never the same as the imaginary “thing”, which is a product of subjective imagination, not the existence of an objective object.

3 Before Aristotle, Plato also had his own “theory of imitation”. Plato believed that the “idea” was the source of the world, that the real world was an imitation of the “idea”, and that art was an imitation of the real world. In this sense, art is an imitation of imitation (or “shadow of a shadow”). Aristotle rejected Plato’s “theory of reason” and defined the object of art’s imitation as the real world that human beings are directly confronted with.

of imitation. Therefore, the inherent connection between imitation theory and objects is intertwined with its relationship to the “four causes”.

According to Aristotle, any artifact, including art, has four general causes: material, formal, motivational, and purpose. “Material” refers to the original substance from which things are made, such as bricks and mortar for building a house. “Form” encompasses the essential definition of things and their manner of existence, representing the overall structure of the house, for instance. “Motivation” pertains to the force driving a material toward a specific form, which could be the craftsmanship and skills of those constructing the house. “Purpose” signifies the end or goal for which a specific thing exists, like whether the house serves as a church or a dwelling. Aristotle classifies the last three causes as “formal causes” because they share the same nature. Consequently, the “four causes” effectively condense into two primary types: material and formal. Material represents the potentiality of things, while formal embodies their reality (Zhao 2008).

Both sculpture and painting share the essence of portraying the world of objects through lines, colors, and textures. Regardless of the medium, the object of imitation or reproduction belongs to the physical realm. The distinction lies in the method: sculpture involves carving away excess material until it matches the figure, while painting entails adding lines, colors, and other materials to a blank surface until it resembles the envisioned object. In the creative process, the artist first envisions the image, reflecting the physical world in their mind, before giving form to the material. This process underscores the argument that “art is the imitation of the world”, establishing the material nature of the object of imitation. It asserts that artistic creation mirrors the world through the artist’s interpretation. In these judgments, the object world typically denotes the physical realm, emphasizing that “imitation” is intrinsically linked to physical objects. Thus, the theory of imitation asserts that art replicates the physical world.

Let’s consider calligraphy. The object of writing appears to be the text itself, and the writing process seems to be the imitation of the words, but this perception is flawed. Text is not an objective entity; it is a human creation, not inherent to the material world. So, how can we label it as an “imitation”? Words originate as mental constructs before being transcribed onto paper. Once written, printed, and disseminated, text becomes a communal product recognized by users. However, this is the “used” word, not the word itself. Words, from their inception, exist as mental images. When written, they externalize and materialize these imagined concepts. Thus, as the object of writing, words aren’t material but “images of words”. These images aren’t just the origin but also the enduring form of words. In everyday speech, words are stored in human memory. Writing emerged as a tool to represent language, shifting language’s referentiality from spoken to written form. In this sense, Derrida describes words as “the signifier of the signifier” (Derrida 2005, pp. 8–9).

Certainly, “words” exist in both visible written forms and in unseen mental representations. This duality imbues the concept of “word image” with both visible and invisible meanings. However, are the visible words written out considered a material existence? Not quite, as tools like pen, ink, paper, and ink stone merely facilitate the writing process – they are not equivalent to the words themselves. Different writing tools may influence the appearance and aesthetic of the written words, but they do not alter the sound or meaning of the words. In essence, writing tools impact the visual representation of the words, not their auditory or referential qualities.

Words are neither objective entities nor tangible “things”; they exist objectively only as linguistic codes, becoming social public goods in this sense. This objectivity is limited to their universal recognition as symbols, not in terms of the inherent nature of the symbols themselves. Words, as language codes, are as subjective and psychological as language itself because any symbol, whether linguistic or textual, is ideographic. Each word or phrase originates from the calligrapher’s mind, resulting in different interpretations of the word image among calligraphers. Once written and externalized into a calligraphic icon, handwriting varies due to factors like intentionality, physical movement, and writing tools, akin to a unique “finger print” that serves as the calligraphers’ signature. While the symbolic aspect of calligraphy is objectively recognized, the personal writing style remains subjective. It is essential to distinguish between the immateriality of the calligraphic icon and its physical existence – the latter being the result of writing rather than writing itself. Writing technique, being immaterial, underscores why UNESCO recognizes Chinese calligraphy as an “intangible cultural heritage”.⁴

It appears that Liu Zangji’s initial reliance on the reflection (imitation) theory of calligraphy lacked thorough consideration, leading to a misunderstanding. Perhaps prompted by criticism, he revised his perspective in *The Beauty of Calligraphy* (1993), published 14 years later, introducing the “theory of analogical icons” to address the shortcomings of the reflection theory. Liu posited that while in the poetic world there is “Bixing (comparision)”, and “Bide (comparision of morality)” in appreciating the natural beauty, “Bixiang (comparison of icons, or analogical icons)” exists in the arts of crafts, music, dance, calligraphy, and architecture. Unlike “Bixing” and “Bide”, “Bixiang” involves complex comparisons, not based on verbal or realistic depictions but on the creation of visual or auditory images. It compares the changes of *yin* and *yang* expressed in all things in heaven and earth through the representation of “images” (Liu 2006, pp. 90–100). Liu’s concept of “comparison of icons” involves

4 At the fourth session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), held from 28 September to 2 October 2013, Chinese calligraphy was inscribed on the World Intangible Cultural Heritage (WICH).

comparing not items found in reality but rather the “images produced by vision or hearing”, effectively rejecting his own reflection theory of calligraphy. This rejection stems from the understanding that visual and auditory “images” such as “stone” or “water droplets”, “sharp knife” or “ribbon”, are subjective and immaterial. While Liu’s shift is significant, he doesn’t extensively elaborate on the term “Bixiang”, instead associating it vaguely with “the change of *yin* and *yang* in all things in heaven and earth,” which remains too abstract and general.

In existing research, the concept of “Bixiang” primarily appears as rhetoric on calligraphic studies, where “Bixiang” mainly pertains to poetry composition. Meanwhile, “Bide” is not limited to the “appreciation of natural beauty”. Many paintings featuring nature as their subject matter aim to embody “Bide” in their artistic purpose. For instance, paintings depicting plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum are likened to the “Four Gentlemen,” drawing parallels between natural objects and the virtues they symbolize. This association of “Bide” with the aesthetic psychology of the Chinese people has permeated into artistic creation, appreciation, propositions, and theories, particularly in painting art, blurring the lines between these activities.

2 Verbal Icons, Analogical Icons and Calligraphic Icons

As text serves as a substitute for speech, character icon likewise acts as a substitute for verbal icon. Consequently, the primary focus of analogical icons in calligraphy should be the verbal icons, and verbal icons turn to be the calligraphic icons through the analogical process. Wei Shuo even applied the method of analogical icons to stroke analysis, that is, — (horizontal) resembles “thousands of miles of cloud formation”, 丶 (point) resembles “a falling stone from high mountain”, 丿 (apostrophe) resembles “a broken rhino horn or elephant tusk”, ㇏ (hook) resembles “a powerful crossbow firing an arrow”, 丨 (vertical) resembles “withered vines of ten thousand years”, ㇚ (down) resembles “crashing waves, or thunder breaking through clouds”, ㇚ (horizontal folding hook) resembles “crossbows tendons and joints” ... so on and so forth (Chen and Cui 2013, p. 5). “In short, it is a structure that conforms to the laws of nature, a ‘likeness’ or ‘analogy’ to the infinite variety of structures in the heavens and the earth.” (Liu 2006, p. 103) Undoubtedly, Mr Liu’s list of examples is very common and well-known in the field of calligraphic studies, and we might call it “rhetoric of comparison”, i.e., describing or praising the art of calligraphy by way of rhetoric of comparison. Our question is: What prompted the frequent use of comparative rhetoric in ancient Chinese calligraphy theories?

The rationale appears straightforward: firstly, the calligraphic icon is not a direct representation of an object, so abstract lines may take on figurative qualities, thereby inviting comparison with tangible images, referred to as “analogical icons”. Conversely, there is no necessity to compare tangible images, as they inherently represent objects. Secondly, concerning the particular beauty of calligraphy, the calligraphic icon serves as a representation of pen and ink modeling, conveying a meaning that defies verbal expression. Because this meaning is ineffable, it necessitates comparison with tangible images to articulate the inexpressible. In this context, the rhetoric of comparing images serves to articulate the ineffable.

Now that the inevitability of the rhetoric of comparison is evident, it is imperative to delve deeper into the act of writing itself: does a natural connection exist between the rhetoric of comparison and the creation of calligraphy? Is the thought process behind writing truly as objective as the rhetoric of comparison suggests? The answer seems to be affirmative. Most Chinese calligraphy theories are not founded on logical deduction, contrasting sharply with Western aesthetic “logos”, but rather stem from calligraphers’ personal experiences. In essence, ancient Chinese calligraphy theories emerge directly from the hands of practitioners, who are both calligraphers and scholars. These “calligraphy theories” essentially represent calligraphers’ introspection on their own writing experiences. This dual role of evaluation and practice embodies a fundamental aspect of ancient Chinese epigraphy: evaluation and practice are inseparable, forming a unified whole. Thus, the rhetoric of analogical icons, or comparison of images, authentically reflects the process of calligraphers’ contemplation on writing, capturing the essence of their thought process. Consequently, we can define the rhetoric of comparison at the level of thought: it encapsulates the essence of calligraphic art, akin to how the theory of imitation embodies the essence of painting and other art forms. In essence, “analogical icon” not only serves as the rhetorical pattern of Chinese calligraphy but also represents the thought process underlying the entire art of calligraphy.

In what aspect does calligraphy differ from painting in terms of imitation? Firstly, it is crucial to understand that the images being compared are “images of objects”. However, this is merely a standalone observation. When placed in a specific context, these “images of objects” are clearly products of imagination inspired by verbal writing. In essence, these “images” originate from “verbal images” and are closely intertwined with the realm of language, belonging to the psychological realm rather than the physical world directly imitated by painting. More precisely, “analogical icon” represents the emotional expression arising from a particular writing context and scene, influenced by the characters penned by the calligrapher. Moreover, the concept of “analogical icon” in calligraphy arises directly from the act of writing itself, as the written characters trigger the imagination of objects. Therefore, the essence of calligraphic comparison lies in the delayed manifestation

of the verbal icons conveyed by the written characters, rather than a direct reflection of the physical world.

Unlike the direct object in imitation theory, which is visible and bears resemblance to the depicted object, the object in calligraphic comparison is intertwined with the character's meaning, becoming part of the verbal icon. Here, the direct object of comparison is the character itself, its meaning, rather than the physical entity it represents. This comparison process relies on free association rooted in the calligraphers' inspiration from the text or induced by the verbal icon of the text. Considering that calligraphers inevitably contemplate the meaning of the characters they write, the act of writing is deeply influenced by this verbal icon. For instance, when we hear, say, write, or recognize the character "tree", an image of a tree simultaneously emerges in our minds.⁵

When calligraphers write characters, they engage in a complex interplay between the verbal icons, the character icons and the calligraphic icons. This relationship is founded on the heterogeneous isomorphism of these elements (Zhao 2021, pp. 73–88). The "six principles in Chinese character formation" underscores the similarity between the character icon and its reference, namely the meaning. Although modern Chinese characters are predominantly morphophonetic rather than pictograms, the sound remains the sole carrier of meaning in spoken language. When spoken language transitions to written text, the character icon supplants speech, with sound transforming into the silent undercurrent within the character icons. Consequently, visual perception takes precedence over auditory comprehension in linguistic behavior. In this context, readers must initially recognize the character icon, subsequently activating its pronunciation and grasping its meaning. The essence of morphophonetic characters lies in the convergence of the character icon and character meaning. In morphophonetic characters, the auditory component is contingent upon the form of a character, with text primarily deciphered through its visual shape before fully realizing its auditory aspect. Monograms, predominantly pictograms and ideograms, vividly illustrate the alignment between character image and meaning. Composite characters, on the other hand, can be viewed as a synthesis of multiple monograms.

The essence of the Chinese character formation principles underscores the alignment between character icon and meaning, implying that in analogical icon, only the verbal icon can be the object of comparison, with other images serving as indirect rather than direct subjects. This limitation is further reinforced by the fact

⁵ "Verbal icon" is originally a semantic term, which was firstly transplanted to literary theory by Wimsatt, a theorist of the New Criticism, to refer to the artistic images depicted in literary texts through the medium of language, and suggested to replace the vague concept of "image" with this term.

that the calligraphic icon results from the formalization of the character icon. The process of the “formalization of character icon” involves manipulating strokes or adding, modifying, or distorting them to imbue the static character icons with dynamic intentionality. Although the reference of the written character icon may be an “object”, this “object”, as a reference (meaning), pertains more to semantics than the existence of an actual object. Consequently, the icon being compared enjoys complete freedom. This freedom allows various legitimate icons to be compared with the same object (calligraphic icon). For instance, a point (丶) can be likened to “a stone” or “a drop of water”, while a stroke (丿) can evoke the imagery of “a sharp knife” or “a windswept ribbon”. This flexibility underscores the rhetorical nature of Chinese calligraphy, which tends to emphasize the beauty of the calligraphic icons rather than unveil the laws of writing.

Indeed, the verbal icon to which the comparison is made is not isolated from the material world; rather, their relationship is indirect. This relationship mirrors that between character icon and the physical world. Given this, it is natural to understand that “analogical icons in calligraphy” is synonymous with “taking the image as a metaphor”. Therefore, natural objects in calligraphy are analogized to the verbal icon, constituting indirect elements in the analogical icon.

3 A New Field: Calligraphic Iconology

As previously discussed, the verbal icon and analogical icon are inseparable in the conception of calligraphic icon, akin to two sides of a coin, deeply integrated into the organic whole of calligraphy. Despite this inherent unity, traditional studies of calligraphy and contemporary aesthetics often bifurcate into pure technical analysis or vague comments like “the writing style mirrors the calligrapher”, failing to fully comprehend calligraphy’s holistic nature. Recognizing this division, the theory of calligraphic icons introduces a novel field to the study of calligraphic art, departing from past conceptions, methodologies, and foundational theses. This emergence of calligraphic icons as a new domain underscores the need for its distinctiveness and its potential to provide a more comprehensive understanding of calligraphy.

3.1 Chinese Calligraphy from a Phenomenological View

Understanding calligraphy as art poses a fundamental question: how does writing transform into art? This question is central in contemporary calligraphy and serves as a gateway to engaging with global art theories. Across art theory history, from ancient Greece to the present, the inquiry into the essence of art has persisted. Thus,

the exploration of Chinese calligraphy art theory is essential. However, due to calligraphy's unique national and cultural characteristics, applying ready-made rationale directly is impractical. The distinct nature of calligraphy necessitates a nuanced approach, avoiding rigid application of existing frameworks.

The essence of calligraphy art has been largely overlooked in ancient theories, gaining attention only in modern times, largely through the lens of Western concepts like “non-practical” art. However, defining calligraphy solely as “non-practical” fails to align with its historical context, as most calligraphic works throughout history served practical purposes. Even today, despite advancements like printing and digital tools, many calligraphic works outside exhibition halls retain practical applications or clear utility, while still possessing ornamental value and garnering appreciation. This reality suggests that the essence of calligraphy art isn't determined by the writing tool but rather by the nature of writing itself. Therefore, defining calligraphy art should stem from an understanding of the inherent characteristics of writing, rather than solely relying on external factors such as the writing instrument.

In terms of the essence of language writing, it undeniably serves a practical purpose, as it records spoken language, immortalizing ephemeral sounds into enduring “black characters on white paper”. Yang Xiong (53B.C.-18A.D.) aptly encapsulated this dual nature: while “face-to-face verbal communication is optimal”, the written word has unparalleled reach and longevity, spanning vast distances and enduring through time (Wang and Chen 1987, p. 160). If we shift our focus from value judgments to the ontology of writing and its mode of existence, a different perspective emerges: writing renders language visible, transforming fleeting sounds into tangible ink and brush strokes – the calligraphic icon – that can be appreciated as art. Thus, it is the appreciable calligraphic icon that constitutes art.

Language, in its spoken form, exists solely as sound – an ideogram that resonates with the sense of hearing and remains invisible to the eye. It is only through the invention of writing that language assumes a visible form, presenting itself to the world as a “visual image” in the shape of words or books. This understanding of writing and its manifestation is inherently phenomenological, emphasizing the experiential aspect of language representation. This acknowledgment highlights that calligraphic iconology is not a forced application of phenomenology but rather a natural consequence of its principles. Drawing from phenomenological concepts becomes a natural and necessary approach in the study of calligraphic iconology. However, it is essential to distinguish between “writing” and “calligraphy”, as they encompass different phenomena. To delve into the ontology of calligraphy, we must further dissect the nature of writing, particularly the differentiation between character icon and calligraphic icon.

As previously mentioned, character icons possess a dual nature of visibility and invisibility: the invisible character icons belong to the “memory of characters”, representing the mental image of characters, while visible character icons are the characters that have been physically written. From a developmental perspective, any text, starting from the first recognized engraving as a text, is written, and visible text is inherently intertwined with writing. Conversely, as a repository of language, it is customary for characters to be stored in memory; hence, individuals with a rich “character memory” are often referred to as “literati”. In terms of its utility, the act of writing simply amplifies the effectiveness of linguistic representation. Writing extends the duration for which the “calligraphic icon” can be appreciated, and the artistry of the calligraphic icon is merely a “by-product” of writing in general. This underscores the practicality of writing and the non-practicality of the calligraphic icon itself.

The primary aim of distinguishing between character icon and calligraphic icon is to explore fresh perspectives and redefine the essence of calligraphic art. This entails shifting the focus away from the mere practicality of writing and towards reconsidering the act of “viewing” and its associated attention. In essence, the art of calligraphy transcends the artifact itself and its practicality; instead, it encompasses the event of viewing, and the audience’s visual attention and choices play a pivotal role. These choices include whether to focus on the character icon or the calligraphic icon, to prioritize the meaning of the characters or the intention of the calligraphers, and whether to read or simply observe, understand or intuit. Such distinctions lend written works either a practical or artistic character, transforming them into either linguistic artifacts or pictorial expressions, literary texts or calligraphic creations. The character icon and its textual counterpart, as “objects”, merely represent “black characters on white paper”. Yet, the divergent visual attention and choices of the audience delineate two distinct realms, akin to viewing “a mountain from the other side”. This resembles Kant’s notion of the “*a priori* form” of aesthetic judgment (Zhao 2008). This conceptual framework represents the phenomenological perspective of calligraphic iconology, or the redefinition of calligraphy facilitated by phenomenological principles.

The phenomenological perspective of calligraphic iconology does not preclude other ways to look at calligraphy; in fact, it can coexist harmoniously with alternative perspectives, including the utilitarian approach to defining calligraphy. As long as these viewpoints contribute to the interpretation of calligraphic iconology, they remain valuable. Undoubtedly, the phenomenological stance toward calligraphy forms the bedrock of calligraphic iconology theory. It serves as both the inception point and the overarching framework for discussions within this field. By embracing this conceptual lens, one can uncover a multitude of new and diverse landscapes within calligraphy, enriching our understanding of this intricate art form.

3.2 Image and Background Relationship: An Analytical Method

The concept of “image and background relationship” originates from Gestalt psychology, aiming to distinguish which shapes emerge as the “figure” against a background and which remain as the “background” itself. Similarly, the theory of calligraphic iconology, viewing calligraphy as an integrated entity, identifies a parallel “image and background relationship” akin to Gestalt principles.⁶ For instance, in this context, the calligraphic icon, representing the essence of calligraphy as an art form, serves as the “figure”, while the character icon (character meaning) functions as the “background”. The designation of the calligraphic icon as the “figure” stems from its recognition as a work of art; calligraphy, being an art form, embodies the artistic essence of the calligraphic icon, serving as the focal point of intuitive perception and ontological existence. Conversely, the character icon assumes the role of the “background” due to its subordinate position behind the calligraphic icon within the realm of calligraphy. This distinction is particularly evident in cursive script, which epitomizes the quintessence of calligraphic spirit.

Indeed, the evolution of calligraphy as an art form is intricately linked to the written character. It follows a path where the absence of character would render writing impossible, writing serves as the conduit for the emergence of the calligraphic icon, and the calligraphic icon, in turn, becomes the cornerstone of calligraphy art. Grounded in this notion, the theory employs the “image and background relationship” approach to explore the symbiotic interplay between literature and the calligraphic icon. It delves into how literature shapes the calligraphic icon and vice versa, unraveling the intricate dynamics between the two realms. Through this lens, the theory seeks to elucidate the profound implications of their interaction and shed light on the multifaceted relationship between literature and the calligraphic icon.

Brush and ink serve as the common artistic language in both calligraphy and painting, yet the distinction lies in their manifestation: in painting, brush and ink undergo transformation into appreciable images, whereas in calligraphy, they retain their original existence. Calligraphy embodies the essence of brush and ink, with no alteration or embellishment – it simply is. This fundamental difference contributes to the divergent reception of the two art forms: painting, with its readily comprehensible images, is more readily embraced by viewers. Conversely, appreciating calligraphy necessitates literacy – a prerequisite not demanded by painting. In calligraphy, the audience engages with the written character and perceives the

⁶ “Gestalt” is a German word, which is synonymous with “form” or “shape”. In Gestalt psychology, any “shape” is a “whole” in experience that has been reorganized or constructed by the subject’s perceptual activity. Thus, “form” and “whole” become the two key words of Gestalt psychology—the whole of form, or the form of the whole.

calligraphic icon through the identification of characters. Even if not all characters are deciphered, the essence of the text is implicitly understood, imbuing the work with a mystical and profound aura.⁷ Comparatively, the audience for painting experiences a simpler interaction – they intuitively “view” and form preferences based on personal taste, without the need for interpretative literacy. This distinction lends calligraphy an air of nobility and elegance, as its appreciation implies a cultivated understanding of language and culture. Unlike painting, which can be practiced by craftsmen, calligraphy demands a certain level of literary sophistication—an attribute that bestows upon it an elevated status. This elevation is underscored by the graphic relationship inherent in calligraphy – it must be “viewed” to be appreciated, yet its significance transcends mere visual observation. The interplay between figure and ground in calligraphy enriches its depth, yielding layers of meaning that resist superficial interpretation.

It is important to clarify that the concept of the “image and background relationship” in calligraphy differs significantly from that in other visual arts, such as painting. In the context of Gestalt psychology, the “image and background relationship” in painting typically pertains to the positioning of image symbols within the same picture, akin to distinguishing between foreground and background elements. However, the realm of calligraphy introduces a unique dynamic – the distinction between the visible and invisible, which extends beyond the confines of the artwork itself, especially considering that the character icon straddles both domains. On one hand, characters serve as visual symbols; on the other hand, they convey linguistic meaning. Despite sharing a common visual symbol – the written character – it is the act of interpretation that delineates between their roles as image and text. Given the contemporary context, where the relationship between language and image faces unprecedented challenges in the digital age, the exploration of the “image and background relationship” in calligraphy parallels inquiries into the “literature and image relationship”. This academic pursuit reflects a broader humanistic concern and holds significant implications for understanding cultural and artistic expressions in our society (Zhao 2012, pp. 20–28).

In Wang Xizhi’s renowned work, “Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion”, the character “zhi” appears 20 times, each rendered uniquely across the piece – none repeated. This deliberate variation prompts inquiry: Why did the calligrapher choose such diversity? Was it merely decorative or did it signify a

⁷ The connection between calligraphy and the written word is essential to the legitimacy of contemporary “exploratory calligraphy”. Unlike Western abstract painting, which emphasizes line and color as objects themselves, calligraphy retains the inherent nature of pen and ink. In calligraphy, pen and ink remain unadorned, unlike the transformation seen in painting. Therefore, the recognition and principles of abstract painting cannot be directly applied to “calligraphy innovation”.

deeper intention? Analysis within the context of the text's meaning and the relationship between image and background is essential. Furthermore, in general calligraphy creation, factors such as character image modeling, writing speed, rhythm, and the adept use of pen, ink, and water contribute to the overall aesthetic. Understanding the "image and background relationship" within these technical elements and their alignment with the written text is pivotal for a comprehensive analysis.

In short, the new perspective of calligraphic iconology will give rise to a series of fresh questions and challenges awaiting exploration and investigation. A prediction emerges: within the framework of "calligraphic iconology", the tension between the relationship of language and imagery will likely intensify. At the same time, it appears that the ancient harmony between language and imagery may persist. As our research continues, we eagerly look forward to further discoveries and insights.

3.3 Study on Calligraphic Icons

In a sense, the "theory of calligraphic iconology" serves as an ontology of calligraphy art, focusing on the interpretation of meaning through form. It encapsulates the holistic understanding of calligraphy through the written images, primarily comprising three major areas:

3.3.1 Classification Studies

The "classification of calligraphic icons" holds the top position because classification serves as the foundation for human understanding, akin to the critical role of taxonomy in biology for categorizing plants and animals. Central to the study of classification in this context is determining the references or criteria used for classification. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that classification cannot be based solely on one reference or standard; instead, a diverse and multidirectional approach to classification is necessary. Therefore, the study of the classification of calligraphic icons initially focuses on exploring various references and methods for classification. The following aspects represent potential areas involved in the preliminary review of the classification of calligraphic icons, presented as "examples" rather than exhaustive or definitive rules.

- Various styles of writing have different impacts on the calligraphic icons, such as private letters, manuscripts, poems, scriptures, quotations, official documents and scrolls of the Jinshi, etc.
- The influences of different inscriptions and poems on calligraphic icons, such as birds and flowers, landscapes, human figures, stories, religious preaching, etc.

- The relationship between different events (scenes) and calligraphic icons will also render different influences, such as festivals, weddings, funerals, rituals, ceremonies, temples, gardens, squares, earning a living, making friends, exhibitions, granting awards, etc.
- The relationship between different physical properties and calligraphic icons, such as hand scrolls, vertical scrolls, fans, couplets, seals, inscriptions, etc.
- The different writing styles of calligraphy, mainly seal scripts, clerical scripts, cursive scripts, running scripts and regular scripts, but also contemporary “exploratory calligraphy”.

3.3.2 Motif Studies

The motif of calligraphic icons refers to recurring masterpieces in the history of calligraphy, such as “Li Sao”, “Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease”, “A Tale of Luo River Goddess”, “Homeward Bound I Go”, “The Story of Peach Blossom Spring”, “Pavilion of the Old Drunken Master”, “Ode to the Red Cliffs (First and Second)”, as well as “Thousand Character Manuscripts” and “The Heart Sutra”, among others. Given the significant impact these motifs have had on Chinese literature, calligraphy, and even paintings, as well as their role as convergence points for various art forms and cultural cues, a comprehensive study of them can effectively illuminate the interplay between language art and calligraphy art.

Exploring the “motif of calligraphic icons” can yield deeper and valuable insights. For instance, why are only a few works favored by calligraphers across dynasties despite the vastness of Chinese literature? What parallels and distinctions exist between the histories of literature and painting? Delving into these questions sheds light on the cultural psychology of ancient Chinese sayings and phrases, which are also favored subjects for calligraphy. Understanding these aspects enriches our comprehension of calligraphy’s significance within Chinese cultural and artistic traditions.

3.3.3 Case Studies

In the realm of calligraphic icons, if “classification” and “motif” are facets of a whole, the theory requires a process of “synthesis”. Case studies serve as comprehensive examinations grounded in individual instances. These cases encompass various dimensions such as commentaries, calligraphers, history, and theories, facilitating the grounding of concepts and methodologies in theory of calligraphic icons. Through this process, new issues emerge, and new fields of discussion expand, advancing knowledge from specific points to broader scales.

It's important to note that the academic field of calligraphic iconology encompasses more than just the examples discussed above; they serve merely as illustrations of its broader scope. As a nascent field, the practical process often involves navigating unfamiliar territory, akin to “crossing the river by feeling the stones” or “following the vine to find the melon”, rather than having complete control from the outset. Changes in concepts, methods, and theses necessitate continuous adjustments within the theory of calligraphic iconology, including recategorizing resources, reassembling or reinterpreting original materials, and more.

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