

Article

Cultivation of Contemporary Calligraphers' Humanistic Literacy -- Taking the Philology as an Example

Qichen Zhang^{1*}¹ School of Fine Arts and Design, Leshan Normal University; Leshan, Sichuan, China; 332975655@qq.com

* Correspondence: 332975655@qq.com

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Abstract: In the contemporary era, calligraphers are called upon to diligently cultivate and elevate their humanistic literacy. This article posits that leveraging philology as a vehicle for enhancing calligraphers' humanistic qualities represents a path ripe for exploration. Within the current academic landscape, there is a pronounced emphasis on the practical utility of philology for calligraphers, highlighting its instrumental role, while its profound significance in fostering calligraphers' humanistic literacy remains largely overlooked. Consequently, this article delves into the cultivation of the contemporary calligraphers' humanistic literacy through the prism of philological research, encompassing the exploration of newly discovered written materials and the rich tapestry of Chinese character culture.

Keywords: Cultural Literacy in Philology; Calligraphic Philology; Calligraphy Studies; Chinese Character Culture

1. Introduction

Chinese calligraphy art and the art of painting are of distinct literati traits. Chen Shizeng's *Value of Literati Paintings* offers a profound discussion on this point, identifying four key elements of literati painting: character, scholarship, literary talent and thought (Chen, 2021). Calligraphy, as a literati art form, also requires these four elements, which can be encapsulated under the umbrella term "humanistic literacy". Chinese calligraphy has not only formal beauty but also the beauty of artistic conception (Su, 2015). The Chinese calligraphy can possess the dual attributes of "aestheticism" and "spirituality" (Hue, 2010). Consequently, calligraphers are held to exceptionally high standards of humanistic literacy. The calligraphers' humanistic literacy is distinct from the techniques of calligraphy creation and the accumulation of calligraphy knowledge, but is a holistic manifestation of the values, critical thinking skills, aesthetic sentiment, and moral concern internalized by calligraphers. However, in contemporary China, amidst the waning of the traditional literati milieu and a volatile artistic landscape, many calligraphers today find themselves lacking in this essential humanistic literacy.

Philology, the study of Chinese characters, emerged as a discipline in China with Xu Shen's compilation of *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters) during the Eastern Han Dynasty. Since then, it has been a compulsory academic pursuit for Chinese scholars across dynasties, essential for comprehending classical texts and enhancing scholarly knowledge. Philology, as a discipline, also helps scholars enhance their own knowledge and scholarship. The most important branch of philology is "paleography". The oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, Warring States scripts, small seal scripts, and other characters are taken as the research objects in the "paleography". The philology discussed in this article primarily refers to paleography.

Calligraphy has an important connection with philology. While calligraphy artistically expresses the artistic beauty of characters, philology theoretically explores their origins and evolution, explaining the forms, meanings, and pronunciations of characters from past dynasties. As for the calligraphy and philology, the characters are the objects of expression. Calligraphers must possess a fundamental understanding of philology to accurately employ

characters in their creations and avoid inaccuracies, highlighting philology's instrumental value for calligraphers.

It has long been a consensus that philology has instrumental value for calligraphers. Contemporary scholars echo this sentiment: Li S (2021) views calligraphic philology as a foundational tool course, which is essential for the application of characters in the calligraphy art creation and becomes an integral part of a calligrapher's knowledge structure (such as creative ability and intellectual wisdom). Mr. Wang Y (2020) pointed out that for students majoring in calligraphy, the philology should be a "tool" serving the calligraphy art. If students majoring in calligraphy still predominantly focus on learning traditional philology, they may find their efforts in terms of time and energy fall short of expectations. Mr. Liu D (2020) suggests that calligraphic philology, by leveraging philological research methods and achievements, addresses specific writing challenges within the framework of calligraphy art. It diverges from conventional philology, focusing not on character evolution or textual exegesis but on the principles of calligraphic art itself. Mr. Cheng L (2019) further clarifies that the aim of calligraphic philology textbooks is to equip calligraphy students with the proficiency to use Chinese characters correctly. To sum up, while the contemporary academic sphere underscores philology's instrumental role in calligraphy, its potential in fostering calligraphers' humanistic literacy remains largely unexplored.

Therefore, this article will delve into how philology can be employed to cultivate the humanistic literacy of contemporary calligraphers, affirming its unique value to them and aspiring to contribute to the advancement of contemporary Chinese calligraphy.

2. Research method

With the cross-integration of philology and calligraphy studies as its starting point, this article delves into the role of philology in fostering the humanistic literacy of contemporary calligraphers. To explore this topic comprehensively, the following three research methods are employed:

Literature research method. This method involves a systematic review of relevant literature across philology, calligraphy studies and Chinese character culture studies. Special attention is given to the classics of traditional philology, such as *Shuowen Jiezi*, as well as scholarly discussions on calligraphic philology by scholars like Li Shumin and Wang Ying. This review aims to clarify contemporary academic trends regarding the instrumental value of philology. Additionally, works on Chinese character culture studies by scholars such as Liu Zhiji and He Jiuying are referenced to establish a theoretical framework for the viewpoints presented in this article.

Case analysis method. This method selects typical cases from various dimensions to substantiate the arguments. Calligraphers like Jiang Weisong and Cong Wenjun are used as examples to demonstrate how philology contributes to enhancing the academic accomplishment of calligraphers. Furthermore, the case of Xu Wuwen is examined to illustrate the value of new written materials in fostering innovation in calligraphy creation.

Interdisciplinary research method. This approach involves breaking down the disciplinary barriers between philology and calligraphy studies to construct an interdisciplinary research perspective. By viewing calligraphy as an extension of philological study, this method highlights the significant value of philology's academic achievements and cultural connotations in cultivating the humanistic literacy of calligraphers.

3. The Research Value of philology in Cultivating calligraphers' humanistic literacy

Chinese characters serve as the common research objects of philology and calligraphy, with philological research significantly enhancing calligraphers' cultural literacy. The history of calligraphy before the Han Dynasty closely parallels the evolution of Chinese characters, both tracing the transformation of character forms as their central narrative. In the early calligraphy history, spanning from the Yin-Shang Dynasties to the Qin and Han Dynasties, there were no professional calligraphers, and the calligraphy had not developed to a self-aware level. The primary concerns of early calligraphy history encompassed the writing methods of Chinese characters, the emergence and development of Chinese calligraphy art, the development of writing concepts, and the evolution of calligraphic styles. Research on the aforementioned topics should center on the evolution and development of fonts as the main thread. The period from the Yin-Shang Dynasty to the Qin and Han Dynasties witnessed a profound change in Chinese characters, marked by the emergence of five distinct calligraphy fonts, improvements in writing tools such as bamboo slips and paper, and the advent of diverse brushwork techniques. However, early calligraphy history lacked a self-aware phase, with a scarcity of calligraphers, calligraphy works, and those with conscious aesthetic aspirations, making it difficult to clarify the development path and the sequential logical relationship. Specifically, from the Yin-Shang Dynasty to the Qin and Han Dynasties, the scarcity of transmitted documents left key issues unresolved, such as total duration of the Yin-Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties, the genealogies of the kings and dukes of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties and the initial feudal grants and genealogies of minor vassal states during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. This brings great difficulties to the study of calligraphy history. The research on

the early history of calligraphy can be completed by properly addressing these issues. For many years, I have dedicated myself to researching the calligraphy of the bronze inscriptions from the Zeng State, namely, inscriptions on bronzes. The Zeng State was a vassal state of the Ji clan, existing from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Warring States Period in the region around present-day Suizhou, Hubei Province. In historical texts, the Zeng State is also referred to as the Sui State, with extremely limited historical records and few cultural relics unearthed. Consequently, knowledge about the Zeng State's history has remained scarce since ancient times. However, since the excavation of the Tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng (early Warring States Period) in 1978, significant archaeological discoveries related to the Zeng State have continued to emerge. A wealth of inscribed cultural relics has been unearthed from various sites, including the Yeji Hill Site (early Western Zhou Dynasty), the Guojiamiao Cemetery (from the late Western Zhou Dynasty to the early Spring and Autumn Period), the Sujialong Site (early Spring and Autumn Period), the Zaoshulin Cemetery (mid-to-late Spring and Autumn Period) and the Suizhou Wenfengta Site (late Spring and Autumn Period to early Warring States Period). Through meticulous collection and organization, I have compiled over 700 pieces of bronze inscriptions from the Zeng State, clarified their developmental trajectory and elaborated on the styles and characteristics of their calligraphy. This achievement is closely tied to the assistance provided by philological research. The abundance of cultural relics unearthed from the Zeng State has sparked a research boom in the study of Zeng State characters within the field of paleography. Through this research, many significant questions have been answered. We now know that the Zeng State was indeed the SUI State, a Ji-surnamed fiefdom descended from Nangong Kuo of the early Western Zhou Dynasty. Additionally, it has been revealed that the Zeng State was compelled to transform from an independent vassal state to a vassal state of Chu during the mid-to-late Spring and Autumn Period. Consequently, a complete historical and cultural sequence of the Zeng State, spanning from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the late Warring States Period, has been constructed. For this very reason, my research on the bronze inscriptions of the Zeng State goes beyond superficial style descriptions. It represents a comprehensive study that distinguishes the era and type of Zeng State bronze inscriptions and places them within a complete historical and cultural context. Ultimately, I completed the *Research on the Calligraphy Art of Zeng State Bronze Inscriptions*, which has become an important document in this specialized subfield, which is inseparable from my philological research related to the Zeng State.

The periodization of oracle bone inscriptions holds immense significance for studying the evolution of oracle bone inscription calligraphy styles. Without a clear understanding of the periodization of oracle bone inscriptions, establishing a timeline for the evolution of oracle bone inscription calligraphy styles becomes impossible. Scholars such as Dong Zuobin, Hu Houxuan, and Chen Mengjia have conducted in-depth research on the periodization of oracle bone inscriptions, yielding relatively reliable conclusions. For instance, Dong Zuobin's division of oracle bone inscriptions into five periods, based partly on the shape and style of characters, exemplifies the integration of philological and calligraphy research. Much of our research on the contemporary history of oracle bone inscription calligraphy is based on the phased research results of the aforementioned scholars. Similarly, the periodization and dating of Western Zhou bronze wares and bronze inscriptions profoundly influence the study of Western Zhou bronze inscription calligraphy. Research on bronze inscription calligraphy cannot advance without the chronological dating of bronze inscriptions clarified through philological research.

Contemporary calligraphers often lack a profound grasp of early calligraphy history. To deepen their understanding, it is advisable to intertwine the study of calligraphy history with the evolution of Chinese characters, tracing the evolution of characters from the Yin-Shang Dynasty to the Qin and Han Dynasties through a philological lens. Subsequently, they can observe the evolution of calligraphy styles by employing the research methods of the history of calligraphy and art. This approach constitutes an effective learning strategy for contemporary calligraphers. Philology, an ancient discipline dating back to the Han Dynasty, not only furnishes calligraphers with essential knowledge but also cultivates their traditional scholarly attainments, infusing calligraphy with a refined literati elegance. Since modern times, numerous calligraphers have attained remarkable achievements in calligraphy art through their exposure to research in philology. For example, Jiang Weisong developed a unique personal style in his bronze inscription calligraphy thanks to his extensive research on bronze inscriptions over a long period of time. He emerged as one of the most celebrated calligraphers of the 20th century. Another example is Cong Wenjun, who works at Jilin University, an institution with a vibrant philological research atmosphere. He combined his research in philology with that of calligraphy, not only achieving significant accomplishments in the field of early calligraphy history research, but also having a considerable influence on the creation of bronze inscription calligraphy.

4. Value of New Textual Materials that the Research in Philology Focuses on for the Cultivation of Calligraphers' Humanistic Literacy

Philological research enables calligraphers to stay abreast of the latest developments and pay more timely attention to newly unearthed written materials, which can offer fresh styles for calligraphy creation. Foreign characters cannot provide the inspiration for Chinese

calligraphy. Although artist Xu Bing attempted cross-language hybrid calligraphy by integrating English words into the framework of Chinese characters, this was merely a transient phenomenon and failed to chart a new course for contemporary calligraphy (Lee, 2015). The innovation in modern calligraphy still hinges on ancient characters for an endless supply of inspiration. For example, the rubbings and annotated transcriptions of the inscriptions on the Three Artifacts of King Zhongshan were first published in the first issue of the journal, *Cultural Relics*, in 1979. Mr. Xu Wuwen was the first to pay attention to the newly unearthed artifacts of the King of Zhongshan, drawing inspiration from them for his calligraphy creations and producing refreshing works that pioneered a new field of calligraphy. To this day, numerous calligraphers continue to dedicate themselves to creating calligraphy in the style of the King Zhongshan seal script, a testament to Mr. Xu Wuwen's pioneering contributions (Zhang, 1979).

Calligraphers often restrict their choices of models for copying to "copybooks" only. New textual materials are typically published as professional books on philology, and it often takes years before publishing houses release them as copybooks. For example, the creation of Qin bamboo slip calligraphy has been quite popular in recent years. However, not enough attention is paid to new materials of Qin bamboo slips in the circle of calligraphy, and new materials of Qin bamboo slips are rarely seen in the copying and imitation exhibition. Calligraphers often rely on established copybooks like *Masterpieces of Qin and Han Bamboo and Silk Slips*, published by Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House, which is obviously not comprehensive enough. After more than a decade of collation work on the newly unearthed Qin bamboo slips (such as the 2,176 numbered Qin bamboo slips purchased and collected by Yuelu Academy from Hong Kong in 2007), the entire collation and publication process was only completed with the release of *Qin Bamboo Slips Collected by Yuelu Academy (Volume 7)* in 2023. These seven precious volumes of textual materials on Qin bamboo slips receive little attention in the calligraphy community.

Relevant departments, such as cultural relics and archaeology institutes and museums, do not prioritize the publication of textual materials in the form of copybooks; as a result, useful new calligraphy copybooks are scarce. A large number of bronzes have been unearthed from the Zeng State archaeological sites. The "Zeng Gongqiu Bianzhong" unearthed from the Zaoshulin Cemetery in 2019 includes the Bo Bell (M190:35) with inscriptions comprising 38 lines, 226 characters in total (Guo, 2020). Its strokes are slender, vigorous, and fluent, and its character forms are neat, poised, and well-proportioned. It represents a transitional stage from the Western Zhou bronze inscription calligraphic style to the Chu bronze inscription calligraphic style and can be regarded as a typical example of bronze inscription calligraphy in the Mid Spring and Autumn Period. However, it is a great pity that such bronze inscription materials only have unclear photos and copies of the inscriptions, rendering them unsuitable for calligraphy copying.

The calligraphy community's acceptance of new textual materials lags far behind that of the academic circle of philology. It is recommended that calligraphers pay closer attention to new textual materials to seek fresh sources of inspiration for their calligraphy creations. New textual materials are also an integral part of the research on calligraphy history. With new materials, research on calligraphy history is more likely to yield new results. A calligrapher's humanistic literacy is inextricably linked to a profound understanding of calligraphy history.

5. Value of Chinese Character Culture Elucidated by the Research in Philology for the Cultivation of Calligraphers' Humanistic Literacy

Philology plays a pivotal role in enhancing humanistic literacy and fostering a broad-minded literati spirit. In ancient China, learning characters and mastering calligraphy were concurrent endeavors. Chinese characters, as the spiritual and cultural creations of the ancient Chinese, contain the early thoughts and emotions of the Chinese nation. However, the modern promotion of simplified Chinese characters has somewhat constrained their aesthetic potential (Hammond, 2017). Moreover, the knowledge of ancient philology is rarely incorporated in depth into the national education system. Philology is no longer the foundation of all academic disciplines. Against this backdrop, we should advocate more fervently for the resurgence of philology, particularly within the realm of calligraphy art.

Since the Han Dynasty, philology has been the foundation of Confucian classics studies and closely related to them, with profound traditional cultural connotations. For ancient scholars, philology was instrumental in deciphering the classics and striving for the lofty ideal of "ushering in the eternal peace for all generations". After the Han Dynasty, the calligraphy gradually evolved into a self-conscious art form, accompanied by a proliferation of theoretical works on calligraphy. Calligraphy and characters are frequently discussed in the treatises on calligraphy, such as Wei Heng's *Treatise on the Forms of the Four Scripts*, Wang Yin's *Catalogue of Ancient and Contemporary Scripts*, and Zhang Huaiguan's *Treatise on the Six Scripts*.

Since ancient times, there have been numerous scholars who are proficient in both philology and calligraphy, achieving remarkable achievements in both fields. Their calligraphy seems to exude a literati elegance. The emergence of such a literary elegance is not attributable to their application of ancient writing knowledge in calligraphy creation or how many ancient

Chinese characters they have memorized, but due to their having long been nurtured by the Chinese character culture.

To cultivate a broad and profound mindset among the literati, it is imperative to emphasize the study of Chinese character culture. Having undergone more than three thousand years of development, Chinese characters are still in use today and stand as one of the rare writing systems in the world that preserves the unique characteristic of conveying meaning directly. These characters are repositories of rich historical and cultural knowledge, prompting numerous modern scholars to delve deeply into their essence. Notable works in this field include Professor Liu Zhiji's *A Brief Introduction to Chinese Character Culture* (1994) and *A Comprehensive Study of Chinese Character Culture* (1996), as well as Professor He Jiuying's *A Grand Panorama of Chinese Character Culture* (1995) and *Chinese Character Culture Studies* (2000). A great many monographs and treatises have been published one after another, evolving into a grand panorama, with the discipline of Chinese Character Culture Studies formed. The focus of Chinese character culture lies not merely in the form, pronunciation, or meaning of individual characters, but rather in the myriad cultural phenomena that spring from them. Calligraphy, as the artistic expression of writing Chinese characters, is an indispensable component of this cultural tapestry. As the esteemed scholar Mr. Chen Yinqu once remarked, "every explanation of a single character is akin to composing a cultural history". For calligraphers, who frequently engage with and utilize ancient Chinese characters, paying meticulous attention to the cultural connotations embedded within these characters offers an excellent avenue to explore and immerse themselves in traditional Chinese culture.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research in philology plays a foundational role in the cultivation of contemporary calligraphers' humanistic literacy and enables them to initially possess the methodology of philology and broaden their horizons. The new textual materials that the research in philology focuses on are an extension of the materials. Building on the content of the preceding chapter, this research emphasizes dynamic frontiers, offering calligraphers fresh visual resources and historical insights, thereby reflecting the contemporaneity and openness of humanistic literacy. Furthermore, it is clarified by the research in philology that the Chinese character culture has ascended to the realm of cultural philosophy, aiding calligraphers in grasping the spiritual essence of Chinese characters. This understanding enables them to infuse their creations with a profound cultural identity and achieve an ideological elevation in their humanistic literacy. From foundational principles to the extension of materials and ultimately to cultural philosophy, this article advocates for the step-by-step enhancement of contemporary calligraphers' humanistic literacy through philology.

To better enable contemporary calligraphers to study philology, it is essential to advance the establishment of the discipline known as "calligraphic philology". I have elaborated on the disciplinary framework of calligraphic philology and delved deeply into its core connotations in the Further Discussion on the Construction of Calligraphic Philology. Currently, substantial progress has been made in the field of calligraphic philology, providing a wealth of resources that can support the development of a dedicated course in this area. Students enrolled in higher education programs focused on Calligraphy often find it challenging to fully absorb the content of traditional philology courses. Therefore, I propose the introduction of a specialized "calligraphic philology" course tailored to the needs of Calligraphy majors. The primary objective of this course is to cultivate students' proficiency in correctly using both ancient and modern characters in their calligraphy creations. A secondary, yet equally important, goal is to enhance students' humanistic literacy. For institutions capable of offering such a course, I recommend a structured, three-stage approach. In the first stage, a course titled *Introduction to Shuowen Jiezi* should be introduced to help students grasp the fundamental principle of "the six categories of Chinese characters" and familiarize themselves with the basic forms of ancient Chinese characters. The second stage should feature a course called *Introduction to Philology*, where students can engage in an in-depth study of the fundamental principles of ancient philology and attempt to read materials from unearthed documents. In the third stage, a *Special Topic on Characters Used in Calligraphy Creation* course should be offered, allowing students to freely select script forms (such as oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, Warring States scripts and small seal scripts) that align with their individual calligraphic styles and interests. Under the guidance of teachers, students can then conduct independent, inquiry-based learning. These three progressive courses are designed to facilitate students' longitudinal mastery and integration of philology knowledge. Moreover, they should form an integral part of a broader curriculum system that includes courses such as the *History of Calligraphy and Ancient Calligraphy Theories*. This horizontal integration among courses will promote a comprehensive understanding and lay a solid foundation for students' long-term development in the field. Ultimately, the development of the calligraphic philology course is intrinsically linked to the advancement of the calligraphic philology discipline as a whole.

Through the discussion in this article, I contend that contemporary calligraphers should embrace philology as a lifelong pursuit. Despite its inherent difficulty, philology should not be overlooked. In recent years, there has been a growing consensus within the calligraphy community regarding the importance of improving the philology level of calligraphers, and

philology has garnered increasing attention. However, on the whole, the philological skills of contemporary calligraphers have yet to reach the desired standard. No important position it deserves is given to philology, and there are no philology textbooks specifically for calligraphy majors in the professional education of calligraphy at universities. It's suggested in this article to strengthen the construction of the calligraphic philology discipline. The contemporary calligraphers are also recommended to take the following measures: on the one hand, they should focus on mastering the basic principles of philology to address issues related to character usage across various calligraphic styles in their creative endeavors; on the other hand, they should cultivate their humanistic literacy through philology, using it as a springboard for continuous expansion and enhancement of their traditional Chinese cultural literacy. The former addresses practical calligraphy creation challenges, while the latter solves the problems of cultural literacy, self-cultivation, and academic pursuits.

While it is common to view philology as a merely instrumental discipline for calligraphers in contemporary times, this article offers a contrasting perspective. It asserts that philology holds significant value for the cultivation of the humanistic literacy of calligraphers. In comparison to merely regarding the philology as instrumental knowledge for calligraphy creation, contemporary calligraphers' utilization of philology to enhance their humanistic literacy is more conducive to the improvement and long-term development of their overall qualities.

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