

# “Calligraphy” and “Qi” from the Perspective of Philosophy of Information—From the Perspective of Chinese Calligraphy Theory <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** “Qi” plays an important role in Chinese Calligraphy Theory. “Qi” deeply embodies the spirit of Taoism and philosophical speculation with Oriental characteristics and can reflect the core and composition of traditional Chinese art aesthetics. The “qi” of calligraphy determines the character of calligraphy works and is the soul of calligraphy. When “qi” is weak, the quality of calligraphy works is poor, but calligraphy works will have a high style when they are full of “qi”. “qi” governs the aesthetic evaluation and artistic creation of Chinese calligraphy, which runs through the whole history of Chinese calligraphy. From the point of view of Chinese philosophy of information, “qi” is a kind of comprehensive information conveyed in calligraphy works. Calligraphy works should capture important information in such aspects as handwriting potential, romantic charm, strength, significance and antiquity, so as to form the unique character of calligraphers.

**Keywords:** calligraphy; Qi; philosophy of information



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## 1. Introduction

China is a country that pays special attention to recording, retaining, inheriting, accumulating, disseminating and researching historical literature in written form, which is incomparable to any other country in the world. This may be related to the system of civil servant and cultural tradition in Chinese history. Similarly, China is also a country with the most diverse and wonderful painting and calligraphy theories. Among them, “qi” plays an important role in Chinese calligraphy theory.

Mr. Xiong Bingming, a famous calligraphy theorist, once said “Calligraphy is the core of the core of Chinese culture” [1] (p. 37). Although this comment has caused significant controversy and debate among literary theorists, Mr. Xiong’s theory at least provides and inspires people to think about new directions. Notes of Mr. Baiyun on Calligraphy, a work of Wang Xizhi, says “The ‘qi’ of Calligraphy must reach the spirit of Taoism, just like Hunyun (a philosophy of Taoism referring to the state at the beginning).” All at once, the “qi of Calligraphy” rose to the realm of “Taoism”, nature and cosmology. It is found that “qi” of Calligraphy plays an important role in the theory, creation and aesthetic evaluation of Chinese calligraphy.

## 2. “Qi” Is Bred in Nature

“The heaven and the earth contain ‘qi’, then all things arise from ‘qi’”. “Qi” exists in all the things in heaven and on earth. Traditional Chinese philosophy holds that “qi” is the fundamental element of all life, which is intangible and qualitative. It is contained in all the organic structures of life and is the basic element to transmit energy and maintains the existence of life. “Qi” is closely related to vital signs. Once “qi” weakly dies out, the life body full of vigor and vitality will be in a critical state of returning to nature. The

existence, generation, development, decline and extinction of all things are based on the basic movement mode of qi. “Qi” is also a specific category of Taoist philosophy. Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu considers “Everything contains Yin-qi and yang-qi, the two types of “qi” affects and integrates with each other and then they create a state of harmony.” According to ancient Chinese philosophical simplicity, “metal, wood, water, fire, earth” are sublimated to “qi” and “quality”, which are important elements of material composition. The ancient Greeks also believed that everything in the universe was composed of water, fire, earth and qi, and “qi” was one of the four major elements of nature.

The character “yi” in seal character has a “ri” (sun) above it and a “yue” (moon) below it, which means the appearance, distance, size, rotation, change, light and shade of two stars that are most closely related to human beings, including ancient people on earth, and can be seen and deeply felt daily. Later, the “yin and yang” transformation, “Tai Chi” thinking, and “Taoism” spirit were extended. “Yi” not only reflects the change in space, but also embodies the transformation of time, including season change. Time and space make up the four dimensions of the universe.

Qi itself is invisible, “qi changes and becomes the shape of human beings, and the shape changes and life appears [2] (p. 209).” Guan Zi once said “In spring, Yang begins to rise, therefore all kinds of life appear. Additionally, in summer, yang totally rises, so all life grows. In autumn, Yin begins to appear, all life begins to restrain themselves. Additionally, in winter, yin completely comes, so they hide.” In ancient China, a farmer’s saying goes, “In spring, life appears. In summer, it grows. In autumn, they are harvested. Additionally, in winter, they are hidden.”, which can reflect the main agricultural arrangement and work content of peasants in different seasons in ancient Chinese society.

### 3. “Qi” Is the Soul of “Calligraphy”

Chuang Tzu says: “Man’s life is the convergence and divergence of qi. Birth is the convergence of qi while death is the divergence of it [3].” Guan Zi says: “With qi, man will live; and if without qi, he will die. All in all, life cannot live without qi [3] (p. 37).” Wang Chong’s Lun Heng indicates that Yang-qi is considered a Chinese God, for it can help all things grow. Furthermore, Wang Chong adds that human beings depend on Yang-qi when alive, and their Yang-qi will return back to nature after they die. Zhang Zai also says: “All things can come into being through the convergence of qi.”

Both oriental calligraphy and painting are defined by “qi”. Relatively speaking, “qi” in calligraphy is more obscure to understand. Some people consider calligraphy and painting appraisal work as “Yanxue” (A Chinese calligraphy term referring to someone who reads and practices in person); the observation ability of “Yanxue” is based on “Wangqi” (An ancient geomancy term referring to someone who can predict good or ill luck by observing artistic state and style). It requires people to use their eyes to observe and identify the “feeling or atmosphere” of calligraphy and painting works to determine the age, style, author, school, authenticity and quality of calligraphy and painting works. The famous 20th century Chinese connoisseur of painting and calligraphy, Xu Bangda, known also by the alternative name “Half Size” (due to his ability to identify the authenticity of calligraphy and paintings by observing the half size of those works), was able to estimate the authenticity of calligraphy and paintings by the unique “feeling or atmosphere” of the works.

From the perspective of Chinese Philosophy of Information, “qi” is the comprehensive information conveyed by calligraphy and paintings—the accumulation and combination of all kinds of information form the different dispositions and feelings. All of this information can be divided into the following types: handwriting information, verve information, strength information, implication information and information regarding admiration for ancient times. Additionally, the carrier of calligraphy is word.

Handwriting information refers to the vigor presented by the match of the transition form, the degree of writing urgency, shade and other influencing factors of the pen lines. Kang Youwei determines whether someone has achieved “handwriting power” on the basis

of character pattern in calligraphy; he is more skillful than others. The quality depends on the “handwriting power”. From Kang Youwei’s words, his emphasis and admiration for “handwriting power” can be seen clearly.

The verve information refers to the soul of calligraphy works. The quality of calligraphy works depends on the spirits and feeling of the words. Li Zhiyi (also known as Duanshu) of the Song Dynasty once travelled with Su Shi, whom he admired so much that he stressed the primary function of the spirits in his calligraphy work. Chen You, a calligrapher of the Song Dynasty, believes different calligraphy works have their own distinctive characteristics that are worthy of praise.

The strength information refers to the strength beauty shown by the calligraphy works. All the strong and weak, slow and urgent, long and short “writing strength” present different styles and aesthetics. The strength beauty is a significant pattern for calligraphy aesthetics. The strength is strong when the character structure is obvious, while the strength is weak when the character is round. The evaluation rules toward people extend to the aesthetics of calligraphy, which can be widely found in ancient Chinese calligraphy.

Implication information refers to the interest and connotation, which are beyond the brushwork and structure of calligraphy. Any calligraphy work expresses the meaning and content that the author wants to convey. Dong You of the Song Dynasty believes that “calligraphic style” is very important. “The calligrapher’s most important thing is to achieve good calligraphic style. If you stick to the regulation, just like the practice of Jingsheng in the Tang Dynasty, you cannot reach the ultimate realm of the ancients. Some predecessors in the calligraphy circle have a natural talent, and they can show the calligraphic style when they write.” (Quoted from Guangchuan Calligraphy Colophon).

This admiration for information from ancient times reflects the interest of the calligrapher, who admires ancient things. Huang Tingjian advocates the importance of nourishing the self-consciousness of calligraphers by browsing the ancient books and copying: “Ancient calligraphy cannot be just learned by copying and then put on the wall. When you concentrate on those works, you can follow the inner will when you write. Raised in the heart without being tacky, you can then create your own work with a regular style for showing others. Everyone who writes must be familiar with the calligraphy of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. If they know all those works by heart, they will acquire the calligraphy skills of ancient people [4] (p. 148).”.

To sum up, each calligraphy work itself carries different handwriting information, verve information, strength information, implication information and information regarding admiration for ancient times. It is the difference in quality and quantity of this information that causes different calligraphy works to have different “qi”. “qi” is the core spirit of “Calligraphy”. Therefore, calligraphy works should capture important information in many aspects such as handwriting, verve, strength, implication and admiration for ancient times.

#### 4. Conclusions

“Qi” is the essence of all things in the world. It is the foundation of substance and spirit, the living conditions and basic elements of everything around the whole world. The performance of yin and yang reflected by “qi” is also carried out based on the movement and energy transfer of qi, which also shows the Eastern cosmology and thinking mode. The construction of the ancient Chinese sage’s cosmology is closely related to “qi”.

“Qi” is an intelligent summary about how our ancestors viewed the universe and understood the objective laws of things. The “yin and yang spirit” in Yi in the pre-qin period also embodies the convergence and dispersion, rise and fall, decrease and increase, loss and overflow, change and flow in “qi”.

Qi is a metaphysical concept in traditional Chinese philosophy. It is regarded as the master of all things and the inner driving force of life. Later, it extends to the field of calligraphy, and then forms an important aesthetic symbol of calligraphy. It is the most oriental aesthetic category that is very distinctive from Western aesthetics.

Yi-ology thinking, philosophical spirit and cosmology that began in the pre-qin period have always been the aesthetic source of Chinese art which includes calligraphy. The introduction of “qi” theory into the calligraphy evaluation system is a major advancement and innovation in Chinese calligraphy theory, and it is of great significance to the calligraphy and calligraphy creation of later generations.

The character of the calligrapher determines the character of calligraphy. “Calligraphers are like this” is the uniform requirement of Chinese calligraphy in the cultivation of personality. From the view of Chinese information philosophy, “qi” is a kind of comprehensive information conveyed in calligraphy works. The superposition and combination of various information forms different temperaments and styles in different calligraphy works. This information can be roughly divided into the following types: handwriting information, verve information, strength information, implication information and information regarding admiration for ancient times, etc. The carrier of calligraphy is the character. Calligraphy works should capture important information in many aspects such as handwriting, verve, strength, implication and admiration for ancient times, so as to form the unique character of calligraphers.

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