Moral and Philosophical Implications of Chinese Calligraphy

Calligraphy is esteemed as an art universally. Good calligraphy adds beauty to the words and enhances the impact that the words are able to bring to their readers. In East Asian countries such as China, calligraphy is traditionally respected as one of the most highly sophisticated forms of art.

The reason that calligraphy can have such a status in China is partly due to the fact that Chinese written language is pictographic and ideographic, rather than alphabetic. In its primordial form, Chinese written language consists of images that picture their referents or directly signify what they mean. That is different from most other languages that consist of alphabetic symbols that represent sounds, which in turn are used to refer to objects. The pictorial form allows much more room for the writer to render the written words artistically. The alphabet is limited, and once you begin writing, very soon the repetitiveness of letters is obvious. The number of characters in Chinese written language is in the thousands, which provides much variation. Another important factor is the tools that Chinese later invented for writing—soft brush and absorbent rice paper. The strokes written by those tools can be thick or thin, straight or cursive, smooth or rough, the motion can be slow or quick, the ink can be dark or light, wet or dry, the paper can be more or less absorbent. In addition, the structure of the characters and the structure of the whole piece of work can be balanced or out of balance, dull or lively, redundant or succinct—all those permits the artist to fully use her own creativity. It is like dancing with the trace of the movement of artwork.

But what is more interesting about Chinese calligraphy is the moral and philosophical implications of the work such as Confucius' teachings, much like the art in gothic letters and...
As the modern Neo-Confucian philosopher Xu Fuguan plausibly points out, the highest aim of the Chinese aesthetic spirit and the highest aim of Chinese philosophical traditions are the same: to achieve a state of freedom in which the subject enjoys a unity with the Other and is able to move around without obstacle in his or her creative activities as a form of self-expression and the expression of the embodied Dao—the Heavenly nature in human (Xu, 1966).

Confucius has a famous saying regarding arts: "you yu yi" (Analects, 7:6). Wing-Tsit Chan translates it as “Find recreation in the arts” (Chan, 31). Here the word rendered “recreation” is "you,” the same word that the Daoist Zhuangzi used in his
"Xiaoyao You," where it is typically translated as "wandering." Both translations, "recreation" and "wandering," are insufficient and can be misleading. "You" means much more than recreation or wandering. When Confucius talks about arts, he meant broadly arts and skills, including rituals, music, archery, riding, calligraphy and mathematics—the six arts that constitute the basis of his entire liberal education program. Confucius takes those six arts as constituting the six arts that he is artistically capable of being.

Similar analysis applies to Daoism as well. As pointed out by Xu Fuguan, the "Xiaoyao You" in Zhuangzi is also simultaneously a state of artificed life and a state of being one with the Dao (Xu. 1966). When Cook Ding in Chuangzi's story cut an ox, he did it with a perfect rhythm, effortlessly, as if he was dancing and celebrating. In his performance, there was no opposition between himself and the ox, and no opposition between his will and his hands (his skills). In his eyes there was no ox standing in front of him as an "other," and he was able to "go at it by the spirit" without looking with his eyes. "Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants." (Zhuangzi, 46-7) This is a good example of being one with the Dao, but not as good an example of the exertion of artistic creativity as calligraphy. Compared to calligraphy, cutting an ox is much more a matter of skill than a matter of artistic creation. Though both cutting an ox at Cook Ding's perfection and good calligraphy require being one with the Dao, the latter is more a participation with the Dao in creation, and the creation shows the artist's own cultivated nature. The aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy is indeed so sophisticated that how much it is dependent on the moral and intellectual traits. The concepts employed in calligraphy would be sufficient to include qing [emotion, sense, shen [spirit], jing [spark], xing [character], yi [intention], yu [style], qi [manner], etc.], many categories for it is.

From this kind of understanding of Confucian Zhuangzi, calligraphy "is no other great Dao." (Liu Ti Shu Lian) The Confucian Zhuangzi considers that the calligraphy reaches its highest wonderfulness if it shows an "embodiment of the heart" (Xu Shu Duan).

Of course Confucians, we will have different understanding of the differences show in the calligraphy.

For the Confucians that define us and the morally virtuous, courteous, upright, wise, the golden mean—centrality in those characteristics of the Confucian calligraphy works by Qi and the strokes are solid, flowing out, indicating self-embodiment and no effort to show off. The tip of the middle of the strokes are such that we look strong but not swoon to thick, they still appear confidence, no weakness, nor spiky. The strokes of the brush are such that we look strong but not swoon to thick. But they still appear confidence, no weakness, nor spiky. The strokes of the brush are such that we look strong but not.
Set your will on the Way. Rely on humanity. Work on virtue. Rely on humanity. "You," in this context, achieved by the determination to follow Dao effortlessly and effortlessly writing, if one can write at all. Confucians part of being, just like an educated person is supposed to be able to talk in a proper manner, whether they respect the spirit or not. A partial list of the concepts employed in evaluating Chinese calligraphy would be sufficient to show the point: It includes qing [mood, emotion], qi [energy, vital force], shen [spirit], jing [realm, standing], yun [eloquence], fa [discipline], yi [expressiveness], fengge [style], qidu [manner], etc. Ox cutting hardly needs so many categories for its evaluation.

From this kind of understanding, Tang Dynasty scholar Zhang Huaiguan said that the practice of calligraphy "is no other than the practice of the great Dao" (Liu Ti Shu Lun), and Song Dynasty Confucian Zhu Changwen said that "When calligraphy reaches its highest perfection, the wonderfulness of it joins the wonderfulness of the Dao." (Xu Shu Duan)

Of course Confucians, Daoists, and Buddhists all have different understandings of the Dao, and the differences show in their aesthetic tastes about calligraphy.

For the Confucians the Dao is morally virtuous and the morally virtuous is benevolent, courteous, upright, wise, trustworthy, and follows the golden mean—centrality and commonality. Those characteristics of the Confucian morality determines the Confucian taste about calligraphy. Calligraphy works by Confucians are typically that the strokes are solid, with no sharp ends sticking out, indicating their fullness in self-embodiment and no intention to prick others or to show off. The tip of the brush moves always at the middle of the strokes, indicating a sense of righteousness and centrality. Such brush movement method leads to the effect that the marks of the brush are such that when they are thick, they look strong but not swollen, and when they are not thick, they still appear with inner strength and confidence, no weakness or any sign of fearfulness, nor spiky. The strokes look like a kind gentleman with a broad mind who tolerates, understands, cares, and meanwhile, is full of strength and firmness on principle. Every forward move of the brush is preceded by a backward move as a preparation, and every downward line is completed by a slight withdraw of the tip of the brush. The effect of the strokes will be that they all appear with a proper manner, yielding, polite, gentle, with dignity. The structures of the characters are usually stable, solid, indicating their firm stand on righteousness. They may look a little off the proper balance individually, but that is because they are yielding to each other, so that when you look at the whole picture formed by many words, you find a balance of the whole. This is perfectly in accord with the Confucian principle of propriety, according to which individuals must behave in ways that fit their roles defined by one's social position and relationship with others, and fit the particular circumstances.

The best example of Confucian calligraphy is Yan Zhenqing's. Yan was a devoted to Daoism as we know the Xioyao Lue, the "Xiao yao Lue" simultaneously a state of artistic creativity, a state of artistic creativity, effortlessly celebrating, effortlessly cutting an ox at the middle of the strokes, indicating a sense of rightness and centrality. Such brush movement method leads to the effect that the marks of the brush are such that when they are thick, they look strong but not swollen, and when they are not thick, they still appear with inner strength and confidence, no weakness or any sign of fearfulness, nor spiky. The strokes look like a kind gentleman with a broad mind who tolerates, understands, cares, and meanwhile, is full of strength and firmness on principle. Every forward move of the brush is preceded by a backward move as a
official in the Tang dynasty who served the emperor and the country wholeheartedly. On the post of being a governor of Ping Yuan, he implemented policies that benefited the people. When confronting military rebellion, he showed great courage in leading an army to defeat the rebellion, and even single-handedly entered the enemy camp to persuade the rebellions to surrender. Eventually, when given the choice between either to join the rebellions or die, he chose death with no hesitation. Yan’s calligraphy displays his Confucian characters very well. Fully embodied with moral strength, they are strong, vigorous, but not reckless or robust, they are gentle and reserved but not inhibited or noncommittal.

The Daoist takes the Dao to be what is natural. They value simplicity and spontaneity. "Doing by not-doing" is probably the best way to express the Daoist ideal in practice—It is a state in which one is able to do things naturally and spontaneously, with no effort and no arbitrary complication. The Daoist looks for being simple but not self-denial, lively but not bustling, and transcendent but not otherworldly. When such principles are applied in calligraphy, they show preference for less over more, lighter over darker, innocent over articulate, simple over complicate. They like the motion of the brush to be as natural as water sliding down from a leaking wall or a stick drawing on sand—the strokes like that have no arbitrary smoothness, and they never appear to be running out of energy.

A good example of Daoist calligraphy is Shimen Song. It is an inscription on rocks, dated back in the Han Dynasty. “The motion of the brush [displayed in Shimen Song] is like wild crane and gull in leisure, fleecing like immortals,” says the Qing Dynasty scholar Yang Shoujing (Yang, Ping Bei Ji). The strokes look extremely simple and plain, unadorned, almost naive, yet the inner strength and elegance is beyond description. They look reserved, yet everywhere the brush goes it goes with full energy and ease.

A masterpiece of calligraphy that displays both Confucian discipline and also a strong Daoist aroma is Lan Ting Xu, written by Wang Xizhi in 353 A.D. The work has been almost unanimously considered the number-one masterpiece in calligraphy. The original work is lost, allegedly taken to grave by Emperor Tang Taizhong, as the Emperor loved it so much. What we see today are imitations of Wang’s original work, written by other calligraphers. The work displays the poet-writer’s joy in a pleasant gathering of intellectuals at a scenery of flowers blooming, a gentle breeze. In a moment of relaxation, some wine in his stomach flowed out of Wang’s stomach, and he felt inspired to create this masterpiece to express the ideal state of mind. His calligraphy expresses his perfection of Confucian moral discipline, which is clearly a perfect combination.
Chinese Calligraphy

Chinese Calligraphy

whether a line, a dot, or a turn, follows the proper "li" (ritual) so that it starts and ends with a manner, and the strokes all yield to each other and resonate with each other to form a harmonious whole.

The Buddhist takes the Dao to be "nothingness." According to Buddhism, reality does not consist of "things"... all our sufferings come from craving for things that do not exist. We crave for staying young, but there is no eternal youth. We crave for material possessions, but no one can keep them forever. Once we understand this "nothingness," and are able to live a non-attached life, we can be free from suffering. There are many ways this kind of philosophy can be reflected in calligraphy. One clear example is Li Shu tong's case. Li's calligraphy was very handsome before he became a Buddhist monk, just like his own physical appearance. He was extremely talented, capable of being a famous writer, actor, calligrapher, painter, and musician all at the same time. But what made Li Shu tong's calligraphy truly remarkable was his ability to turn his transformation into art. His new style was a reflection of his inner strength and poise.

For instance, the "Lan Ting Xu," dated back in 354 AD, is the work of the brush (discovery Wang Xizhi). It is said by the Qing Emperor Ping Bei Ji) that the calligraphy is Shimen Shui, who is said to be the author of the "Lan Ting Xu."

Day are imitations made by Tang Dynasty calligraphers. The work was a draft of an article about a pleasant gathering together of a group of intellectuals at a scenery spot, with bamboo and water around and mountains and blue sky bathed in a gentle breeze. In a very relaxed mood, and with some wine in his stomach, the calligraphy freely flowed out of Wang Xizhi's hand, displaying an ideal state of being and acting according to the Daoist goal. Wang himself could not have done it so well if he were doing it with the intention of creating the world's number-one masterpiece in calligraphy for thousands of years to come. There were corrections to the text, words added on the side of a line, words that were deleted by a block of ink. All these were kept in the imitations because taking them away would affect the natural beauty of the work. Meanwhile, the naturalness is clearly a cultivated one according to the Confucian standard. It displays years of disciplined training and practice. Every stroke, whether a line, a dot, or a turn, follows the proper "li" (ritual) so that it starts and ends with a manner, and the strokes all yield to each other and resonate with each other to form a harmonious whole.

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same time. At a young age (38, 1918), when his fame was at the peak, to most people's surprise he renounced his earthly life and became a devoted Buddhist monk. Since then he was known as Hong Yi Fashi, and his calligraphy also went through a dramatic transformation. It became less "pretty," less elegant, and less appealing to the popular eyes. It obtained a chilly coldness and simplicity, indicating disinterest in earthly affairs. There are more blank spaces on the works. The characters display little variation, and the strokes move with such a calmness that there is absolutely no anxiety. What is shocking in those works is that they are done by such a talented master, and yet they look so easy going and so "ordinary."

Of course Buddhist philosophy does not have to appear in calligraphy in this particular way. Mi Fu, Shu Shi and Huang Tingjinan were all influenced by Buddhism, yet they had different calligraphy styles. Mi's style is more relaxed, expressive and forthright, Su's style embodies more depth, and Huang's style displays vigor and freedom (See Wang, 9).

What I said above shows how calligraphy is affected by the calligrapher's philosophy. Yet the causal relation is bi-directional—calligraphy as a practice also affects the person morally and philosophically.

By following the examples of master calligraphers, one learns not only their skills, but also their moral characters and their philosophy! By learning from Yan Zhenqing, for example, one will be affected by his strength, his uprightness, his broadness in mind. Learning from Shimen Song,
On the other hand, increases one's ability in appreciating simplicity and naturalness. Therefore, selecting which ancient master to imitate is a matter of selecting which philosophy and moral example you want to follow. People generally advise not to select Zhao Mengfu for beginners, that is because his calligraphy is too "pretty." People will be attracted by the pretty appearance and overlook the search for internal strength, discipline, naturalness, transcendence, etc., and easily slip into an evasive, superficial charm that looks like boneless flattery, currying favor with the viewers. That kind of "charm" can be so disgusting that it is worse than natural coarse. Ming Dynasty scholar Fu Shan (1607-1684) wrote the following influential aphorisms: "Rather be dull than be clever; rather be ugly than be charming, rather be broken than be slippery, rather be straightforward than be arranged" (Fu, Zuo Zi Shi Er Sun). He wrote these specifically with Zhao's calligraphy as a reference. He said in the same article that when he was around twenty, he tried to practice calligraphy after all the Jin and Tang Dynasties models that were passed on to him from his ancestors. Yet he could not make his works even look close
to the models. Then incidentally he got a piece of Zhao Mengfu's calligraphy, and he loved its smooth curves and flowery charm, so he practiced after it. Only after a few times, he was able to write in a way almost indistinguishable from Zhao's model. He said: "That is no different from learning how to be a person—when you look after the models of the morally exemplary persons, you feel that it is as hard to be close to them as for a curve to fit a straight line; yet when you go out with gangsters, you will feel that you are closer to them day after day, and very soon you will be no different from them." "Zhao did practice after the model of Wang Xizhi, yet only because his way of scholarship is not righteous, he swerved to the way of squishy glamour."

There are some other factors that make the process of practicing calligraphy a process of moral education and transformation. Wu Yuru says, "Practicing calligraphy can help the person to be calm, and through that, make the energy full and the spirit complete. Even a little haste will turn the motion of the brush and the ink entirely different" (See Yang, 4). Strokes cannot be corrected once they are drawn on rice paper. Any correction to the strokes will only make them worse. To the sensitive eyes, even the slightest anxiety or hesitation or the intention to impress others will show up in the work. Calligraphy therefore naturally requires the practitioner to be confident and yet modest, calm and yet full of energy. The practice also helps a person to learn the benefit of discipline. The disciplines in calligraphy are not arbitrary rules. They reflect some natural laws that govern motion and life. For instance the aforementioned principle that "let every forward move be preceded by a backward move as a preparation, and every downward line be completed by a slight withdrawal of the tip of the brush." That is just like in order to jump, one needs to bend down first; in order to regain balance after running downhill, one has to lean backward a little. Those are rules one has to learn in the beginning in order to become a master whose brush can dance gracefully and with strong energy that will not easily run out.

The final aim of this kind of learning is to reach a state of freedom where one no longer stands in opposition to the non-self. A person well cultivated through calligraphy should have the confidence, calmness, moral uprightness and courtesy all embodied in the person as her second nature. When this person is in her calligraphy creativity, she will be truly "with herself" when she forgets the self and when she creates the non-self.

What I tried to show above is that (1) the highest aim of calligraphy, according to the Chinese tradition, is to participate the Dao in artistic creation; (2) philosophical views and moral characters influence one's calligraphy; and that (3) practice in calligraphy helps practitioners in building their moral characters and in the formation of their philosophical positions. However, we must not over-simplify the relationship between moral characters and calligraphy. In the Chinese history quite a few notorious "bad people" were able to write beautiful calligraphy, for example, Qin Kui, the Southern Song Dynasty prime minister, who murdered national hero Yue Fei, Cai Jing (his calligraphy appears above), also a Song Dynasty official, who would do anything to get into power, and Mr. Wang, the head of the "Gang of Frivolous Cultural Revolutionaries" (see Yang, 4). Yet his very handwriting is somewhat like a proof of his calligraphy, nor would anyone call him a morally upright person. One way to explain this proposed by Su Shi. Su said that a neat piece of calligraphy can be coarse; yet somewhat like a son can be used to clone contains all the genetic information, a calligraphy work contains all the genetic information, philosophical and moral character in it. Whether this person
The practitioner is the practitioner of the Dao, calm and yet active. He helps a person to discipline in motion and life. The disciplines in motion and life are guided by a principle that precedes a backing-in motion, and every running downhill is preceded by a slight withstanding. The Dao is just like in a person, standing first; in running downhill, standing last. Those are rules that are set in order to become a graceful dancer. The Dao is not easily run down.

The Dao is that which is not easily run down, which longer stands in the person well cultivated, and which could have the name of brightness and honesty. The Dao is the person as her conscience, and her conscience is in her calligraphy. It is written “with herself” in her calligraphy when she creates it.

One way to explain those counter-examples is proposed by Su Shi. Su differentiates the goodness of calligraphy from mere groomed appearance. According to Su, a person who has no training in calligraphy has little skill in writing a neat piece of calligraphy work, so the handwriting can be very undisciplined and coarse; yet somewhat like how any cell in a person can be used to clone the person because it contains all the genetic information of the person, a calligraphy work contains all the philosophical and moral commitments of the person in it. Whether this person is honest, innocent,
or righteous, can still show up in the way she writes the strokes. "A man without a righteous mind will inevitably show in his calligraphy some sign of obsequiousness or cruelty" (Su, Ba Qian Jun Yi Shu Yi Jiao Jing. The same statement is also seen in his Shu Tangshi Liu jia Shu Hou).

Su's view quoted above was developed from a broader view which was first clearly stated by Zhang Huaiguan and later by Liu Gongquan. Zhang says: "It takes several words for an article to convey an idea, it takes only one character for a calligraphy to display a heart-mind" (Wenzi Lun). When Liu was asked by emperor Mu Zong about the way to move the brush, he answered "When the heart-mind is right, the brush will be right."

But we must be careful here to observe that the state of the heart-mind contains more than just moral qualities. It contains many other aspects of the mind such as personality, mood, etc. Bai Jiao calls the sum total of the state of the mind "essence of calligraphy," which include mood, personality, spiritual understanding, and aesthetic taste. Late Qing scholar Yang Shoujing (1839-1915) adds two points to the three points (genius, seeing many other aspects of the mind which include mood, personality, spiritual understanding, and aesthetic taste. Late Qing scholar Yang Shoujing (1839-1915) adds two points to the three points (genius, seeing a lot of good works, and diligent practice) made by another about what is the key to learning calligraphy: one is to have a supreme moral quality. When one's moral quality is superior one's brush moves with elegance, and will not be flunkey. Another is to have rich knowledge. When you have knowledge about thousands of things in your mind, the "qi of the volumes will naturally fill between the lines" (See Gu, 42). Furthermore, it seems that, while one's moral qualities do affect one's calligraphy, they do not necessarily show up in every stroke, and even if they do they are not often discernible. There is a tremendous room for subjective interpretation and even empathic projection.

Su was in fact aware of the possibility of subjective projection. This awareness shows strangely in a statement that is entirely opposite to what we quoted from him above. He says in that statement, "When one looks at a calligraphy, some people think that one can get information about the person. If that were the case, whether the person is a gentleman or a petty-minded person would surely be displayed in the calligraphy. But that is not the case. One cannot even judge a person from one’s outlook, how can one judge a person from calligraphy?"

Sure, when I look at Lu Gong's [Yan Zhenqing] calligraphy, I would indeed not only see his personality, I would even imagine his graceful demeanor, as if I were seeing him censure Lu Qi and condemn Xi Lie. Why? The reason is the same as Han Fei Zi’s story about a man lost his ax. (Ba Lu Gong Tie). In that story from Han Fei Zi, a man who lost his ax suspected that his neighbor stole it. His neighbor's behaviors looked like a thief's in his eyes. However, after he found his ax, his neighbor's behaviors all looked perfectly normal. There was no difference in the neighbor's behaviors. The difference was entirely subjective projection.

This view, as it is too extreme, finds little echo in the history. It is as implausible to argue that moral quality of the person has nothing to do with calligraphy as to argue that every stroke in calligraphy shows moral quality of the person. The fact is more likely that though some calligraphy works can be evaluated in terms of moral qualities, some cannot. When one writes like print, the work may simply be neat and nothing more. It is needed to make more careful study in the ways in which different calligraphy shows moral quality. For instance, Su has a third view that matters in judging the good calligraphy. He says that "The calligraphy in ancient times was in calligraphers' life as well; if the calligraphy was not a groomed piece of work nor a stroke of the eyes but still has no value, one can only see somewhat ambiguous beauty in the interpretation. The first standard is different from the second. If a person is immoral, his calligraphy may not have value regardless of the

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Another is to have knowledge of the "qi fill between the mind, the "qi fill between the eye are not often room for sub­conscious, it seems that, affect one's calligraphy. One can get some of the case. One may not see his per­son. The fact that one can get petty-mindedness will show up more easily in calligraphy than the lack of care for the value of life, and one who has much good ambition may not differ much in calligraphy from one who has much evil ambition.

Mao Zedong's calligraphy (shown above) is a good example. Mao, the most influential leader of the Chinese communist movement, was also a master in calligraphy. His calligraphy works show remarkably well his broadness in ambition and courage. They show little, however, how much he cared for life, friendship, and love.

Similarly, in the example on the following page, it is hard to imagine that a person with no courage, confidence, and determination can write this piece, and yet it is also hard to judge exactly how just this person is from this piece of work.

Su has a third view that deserves some attention. He says that "Those who comment on calligraphy in ancient times comment on calligraphers' life as well; if the person was not decent, the calligraphy would not be taken as valuable either." (Shu Tangshi Liujia Shu Hou) In other words, moral standard is superior to other standards in judging the goodness of calligraphy. A groomed piece of work may appear attractive to the eyes but still has no real value. This point is somewhat ambiguous between two more precise interpretations. The first one is that moral standard is different from aesthetic standards. If the person is immoral, his calligraphy works have no value regardless of their aesthetic achieve­
ments. This view was supported by Huang Ting Jian, a contemporary of Su. Indeed, the bad guys are hardly mentioned in the history of calligraphy. Cai Jing was originally one of the “Four Great Masters in Northern Song Dynasty.” But his name was later replaced by another Cai—Cai Xiang, because Cai Jing had a stinky moral reputation. In On Calligraphy, Huang writes: “In learning calligraphy one should keep the Dao and Righteousness in mind, and broaden the self by the teachings of the sages. Only then the calligraphy will be valuable. If your spirituality had no discipline, even if you were able to use brush and ink as skillful as Yuan Chang and Yishao, you would still be a vulgar.” (Lun Shu)

The other interpretation is that moral standard is the highest one among aesthetic standards. A calligraphy work that lacks moral goodness in it has a fatal defect in it aesthetically. This interpretation, whether accurate in stating what was truly in Su’s mind or not, is more consistent with the traditional Chinese aesthetic spirit. In the Chinese intellectual tradition, aesthetics is never sharply separated from morality. The highest aim of both is one and the same—a state of freedom, in which there is no more separation between the subject and the object, the “heaven” and the “human.” In that state, one is able to express one’s own heavenly nature in one’s own creative activity, and fully enjoy the union. The union between what is heavenly and what is human will show up in the calligraphy works with moral characters, and the display of superior moral qualities is itself aesthetically attractive, and therefore deserves the respect as one of the (if not the) highest criteria of aesthetic value. 

A couplet by Xion Renwang.
In the Chinese tradition, calligraphy is not just an art form but a way to express one's own creative inclination. The union between the calligrapher and what is human works with moral superiority to make the works morally attractive, and is therefore considered as one of the highest aesthetic values.

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