

Good essay about the influence of mythology and philosophy on chinese calligraphy...

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



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Throughout its long history, China managed to establish its own place in the world through its arts. Chinese visual culture is so broad a term and usually refers to paintings, calligraphy and other arts that have a socio-political and philosophical relevance. 1 It is a truth universally acknowledged that Chinese art is the avant-garde amongst the Asian countries and the primary root of several cultures such as Japan, Korea and the Southeast Asian countries.

Chinese artists and craftsmen often incorporate the philosophy of Confucianism and Taoism in their artworks such as the unity and harmony of the design. China's art was closely entwined with its history; many of the most notable works done by early Chinese artists reflect their views and emotions towards the society and era they lived. 2 The Chinese people are composed of the intermingling of the many different tribes that settled in the Chinese mainland thousands of years ago. Because of their interactions, China developed several aesthetic motifs and designs derived from the many different tribes found in the area. 3 The purpose of this paper is to study the different art forms that evolved in China based from the paintings and historical documents. This aims to further enhance and deepen the knowledge and understanding of the Chinese visual culture by providing

relevant information for further research. Here in this paper, I would like to argue that the Chinese art are influenced by the mythological backgrounds and philosophy. For hundreds of years, China stunned the world by its rich culture and traditions which provide a good backdrop in creating their own unique style.

- Christopher Crouch, *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010), 15.

- Ibid., 15

- Ibid., 15

The Way of Calligraphy

Calligraphy is one of the noblest forms of artworks in China. Calligraphy is the art of writing using ink and paper. Scholars and even emperors wrote their own poems using different styles of calligraphy. Calligraphy is the art of beautiful writing. The calligrapher and painter Gu Kaizhi was famous for his court paintings and for his calligraphy. 4 Crouch states that before, calligraphy is best enjoyed by the people who held administrative power in the government and literary scholars. Nowadays, everyone regardless of the race can study calligraphy and appreciate the smooth rhythmic strokes created by the brush on the rice paper. 5

The invention of the paper circa 105 A. D. became the turning point in the development of calligraphy and painting. Most of the calligraphy styles were written on silk cloths; however, Yuho suggests that calligraphy is the interaction between the brush and paper. Chinese scripts was invented by

the latter half of the second millennium before the birth of Christ. Instead of letters, they used symbols which later on evolved into a series of lines and strokes. The mythical Hsia dynasty (2070-1600 B. C.) already used calligraphy in ceremonial rituals probably to record their history. 6 They engraved their documents on oracle bones and shells. On the other hand, the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 B. C.) used metals particularly the bronze as their paper to record their history. 7

- Nakata Yujiro and Jeffrey Hunter, *Chinese Calligraphy* (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), 26.

- Tseng Yuho, *A History of Chinese Calligraphy* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993), 117.

- Ibid., 117

- Ibid., 118

Seal scripts are the royal symbol of authority. Government officials and notable people in the society have their own seals. Figure 1 shows an example seal of Li Lianqing, a notable seal carver who also served China as a Vice Premier of the State.

Figure 1: Li Lianqing's seal carved using wood coated with lacquer. The artist's original work was already donated to the British Museum in 2012. 8 The seal above is called juanshu and this is primarily used in document validation. Only the emperor and his court officials were authorized to use the red ink. Compared to the common Chinese scripts, the symbols carved in the seal above were rounded and slightly cursive in appearance. Some scholars identify this script as the bird and worm style mainly because the

Chinese character of 𪛗 (niao) appears too similar to the figure of a bird when written in Juanshu style. The same thing also applies for the character of 𪛗 (chong) because it appears like worms mainly because of the rounded edges and the downward lines of the character. This style became the basis of the Chinese writing system. 9 On the other hand, the Lishu style of calligraphy that came after the Juanshu. This style was widely used during the Han dynasty because of the ease of writing, especially when using a brush. Unlike the Juanshu with rounded edges, Lishu is a much informal style with pointed edges and somewhat resembles the modern Chinese writing system. Lishu's invention was attributed to Cheng Miao, an official working in the prisons during the Qin dynasty. This style lacks delicacy and simplified the complicated Juanshu strokes. From the Lishu style emerged the three modern modes of Chinese writing namely: Kaishu or the common script, is a formal hand analogous to characters. Xingshu is sometimes called the running script is a semi-cursive form of Kaishu whilst Caoshu or the grass script is an abbreviated script and highly expressive.

Chinese Paintings

The earliest known Chinese painting traces its roots way back from the Han dynasty (202 B. C.-220 A. D.)¹⁰ when the walls of the temples and official halls were often painted with murals. Almost none of the early murals survived; however, except for some decorative paintings that are still present within the cave temples and tombs. Murals and large screens were the style evident during the Tang period whilst the earliest style are the handscroll paintings. Scroll painting was traditionally manufactured for the

enjoyment of the elite classes. Many of the early painters are known by name since they signed their works long before this practice became customary in the West. The common motifs for Chinese paintings are the dragon, phoenix, tiger and snake turtle. Chinese painters often based their subjects to the traditional mythology of the four gods. The most popular symbol for the royalty are the dragon and the phoenix. The dragon is for the emperor and the empress because it represents power and authority. Of all the heavenly beings, the dragon motif is widely used even in traditional holidays such as the New Year. On the other hand, the phoenix is sometimes depicted as a fiery bird. Legend says that phoenix is an immortal bird of power which has the ability to rise upon the ashes. Hence, it became popular as well as a subject for painting because it represents ' rebirth.'¹¹

- The British Museum, " Contemporary Chinese Seals by Li Lanqing" photograph, 2012, [http://www. britishmuseum.](http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/contemporary_chinese_seals.aspx)

[org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/contemporary_chinese_seals. aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/contemporary_chinese_seals.aspx) (December 10, 2014).

- Nakata Yujiro and Jeffrey Hunter, Chinese Calligraphy (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), 30.

- Christopher Crouch, Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010), 30.

- Ibid., 30

In addition, birds and flowers became a popular subject in the 8th century. Traditional paintings depicting bamboo and plum blossoms became special categories of painting, sanctioned by the strong symbolic value that these

plant forms held for the literate class. Various other themes appeared in painting, but from the 10th up to the 20th century, the subject honored above was landscape. Unlike the Western world, China believed in a self-creating universe led rather to a mythology of landscape itself. Figure 2 below is the Five Colored Parakeet, made by artist Zhao Ji of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) is a painting especially made for Emperor Huizong. The silk painting depicts the balanced composition and refined brushwork which is typical of the bird and flower style emerged during the period. On the right hand side of the scrollwork is an example of the Kaishu script. The delicate brushwork highlighted the beauty of the flower and the branches. In addition, the artist only used simple colors and one vibrant red color for the chest of the bird. On the upper left and right corners of the scroll is an ancient script written in jianshu style serves as a signature label for the painting. Although the painting is quite simple, it brings out the beauty of the flower depicted as a white against the dark silk background. Zhao Ji's calligraphy style have a sharp edges accented by smoother strokes of the characters. The symbols were neatly written from left to write.

Figure 2: The Five Colored Parakeet silk screen painting of Zhao Ji. 12

The appreciation for simple things is the main message of Zhao Ji's painting. The parakeet represents an innocent dream of happiness and serenity in life.

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Moreover, Ma Yuan often depict the beauty of the nature, such as the Weng Zhengmin Snow Passage which is a simple painting of a snow mountain pass (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Weng Zhengmin Snow Mountain Passes a delicate scroll work

created by Ma Yuan of the Song Dynasty. 14

Ma Yuan's excellent and artistic hands accurately depicted the snow using the light and dark variations of his ink. The shadows form the ridges of the snows, making the scene more realistic than a regular Chinese painting. The leaves of the trees are also painted with equally guarded brush strokes and the dual color tones of the painting retained its simplicity. Here in this painting, Ma Yuan is trying to show his viewers the beauty of the Chinese mountains during winter. The ragged peaks of the mountains dotted by small trees covered with snow. Somehow, Ma Yuan illustrates the beauty of the falling snow coating the mountain tops with its white splendor. Unlike the Western paintings, Ma Yuan portrayed the scene beautifully without using vibrant colors.

- China Online Museum, " Five Colored Parakeet" photograph, n. d.
<http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-birds-zhao-ji-1.php>
(December 10, 2014).

- Judith Smith and Chu-Tsing Li, Tradition and Transformation (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, 2005) 202

- Humid Fruit Wordpress, " Weng Zhengmin Snow Mountain Passes" photograph, 2012 <https://humidfruit.wordpress.com/tag/ma-yuan/>
(December 10, 2014).

The concept that the microcosm of man participates in the macrocosm of landscape is reflected in the tradition of monumental landscape painting that flourished during the Northern Song and flourished up until the Yuan periods. In a classical ink painting created by Ma Yuan, A Mountain Path in Springtime

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(see figure 4), man is portrayed as a tiny element of nature. In his painting he illustrated an old man, dressed in full flowing courtly silk robes and a hat of his office. Probably a literary man or a court official of the king, he seems to gather his wayward thoughts by looking at the small image of a bird flying above. Behind him is a tall weeping willow and an attendant probably a child carrying a traditional harp whilst another bird perched atop the branch of the weeping willow seemed ready to fly in any moment to join the another bird. Probably that the man's original intentions was to play his traditional harp in a comfortable place within the mountains. However, he paused mid-walk, as if pondering his thoughts as he stood in awe, marveling at the beauty and peace he found in the forest. Perhaps, this is the main reason that the scholar is attempting to compose a poem to describe the beauty before him, and yet he seems to struggle for words. On the right side of the painting, a beautiful lyrical verse written in the Xingshu style or semi-cursive script adds to the simple elegance of the painting. Ma Yuan's brush stroke was light and precise, this is especially true with the weeping willow.

Figure 4: A Mountain Path in Springtime (circa, 1200), an ink painting created by Ma Yuan of the Song Dynasty. 15

The leaves of the tree were drawn in a much lighter strokes which gave the tree leaves an aura of fragility. The sturdy branches and the tree's body uses a hard, single brush stroke that silently tell the viewers of its sturdy wood. For the entire painting, Ma Yuan only used black ink onto the white paper and yet, he managed to create a two dimensional effect for the rocks with its gradual light and dark sequence of strokes. This theme is a form of self-expressionism among the artists of the Song dynasty. Figure 4 explores the

deepest thoughts of Ma Yuan, not as an artist but also as a man who is a part of nature. The painting expresses the deep meditation and thinking concerning the beauty of the Earth and its creatures. In this scene Ma Yuan managed to capture the essential relationship of man to his surroundings. Another school of Song painters was that of the Chan (Zen) Buddhist masters, who produced boldly outlined works of great simplicity and spontaneity. A notable example is the Six Persimmons scroll created by the monk Mu Qi. Self-expression surfaced from the other arts in the Song dynasty notably in poetry and calligraphy wherein artists attempted to experiment more of their subjects. 16

As a conclusion, even today, the Chinese arts of the past are still popular with the common people especially with the tourists and serious students of art. Their paintings and calligraphy style are influenced by myth and philosophy which present their identity to the world as a unique culture that originated from the Asian mainland.

- China Online Museum, " A Mountain Path in Springtime" photograph, n. d. <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-ma-yuan-6.php> (Access date: December 10, 2014).

- Judith Smith and Chu-Tsing Li, Tradition and Transformation (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, 2005) 203

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