



## Self-cultivation through art: Chinese calligraphy and the body

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To cite this article: Ruyu Hung (2021): Self-cultivation through art: Chinese calligraphy and the body, Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2021.1977624](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1977624)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1977624>



Published online: 14 Sep 2021.



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## Self-cultivation through art: Chinese calligraphy and the body

In Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics are closely interrelated in the sense that the goal of human existence—the cultivation of the self—can be achieved through moral improvement and artistic refinement. Confucius says, ‘Aspire after the *Dào*. Be devoted to *dé*. Comply with *rén*. Wander the arts’ (志於道、據於德、依於仁、游於藝。) (*Analects*, 7:6). These are four guidelines for living a good life. *Dào* (道), *dé* (德), *rén* (仁), and art (藝) are four vital aspects of the human existence. The term ‘*Dào*’ can be used as a noun or as a verb. ‘As a noun, the ‘*Dào*’ indicates ‘the path’, ‘the way’, ‘the principle’, ‘the law’, ‘the doctrine’, and ‘the truth’. As a verb, it means ‘to say’, ‘to speak’, ‘to express’, and ‘to address’” (Hung, 2018, p. 93). *Dào* as the way or path is not an ordinary or banal way of living or doing but the way that leads to the ultimate reality as well as the creative and everlasting truth of the world. *Dào* is mostly used to indicate the highest principle of the universe and has numerous metaphysical implications. *Dé* means the ethical, the moral, the virtuous, and goodness in a broad sense. In contrast, *rén*, the virtue most frequently mentioned by Confucius, has a more specific meaning. It is often translated as ‘benevolence’ or ‘noble virtue.’ Both concepts carry many ethical connotations. In Chinese culture, *Dào*, *dé*, *rén*, and art are four elements that are necessary for perfecting a human being. Since the time of Confucius, aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics have been recognised as inextricable parts of the Chinese tradition of education, which aims to cultivate the ideal human being, or, in the Confucian term, *junzi* (君子). In this tradition, artistic practice is a way of refining the self. However, not all forms of art in the modern sense serve to fulfil this task. In ancient times, the Six Arts (六藝) were the requisites of the Confucian curriculum to educate literati. These were rites, music, archery, chariotry, calligraphy, and mathematics. Other long-existing artistic activities, such as pottery, woodcraft, sculpture, embroidery, and architecture are usually excluded from the scope of aesthetic self-cultivation. They are considered to belong to the category of crafts, whose aim is to manufacture articles for daily use rather than unique artworks. Among the Six Arts, Chinese calligraphy remains vibrant in modern times. Moreover, it is no longer a prerogative of the elite literati but has become a widely popular activity. For example, traditional calligraphy is commonly included in elementary school curricula in Chinese-speaking societies. Hence, the age-old notion of self-cultivation remains relevant. The art of calligraphy provides a powerful lens through which the aesthetic way of self-cultivation in East Asia, as well as in the global context, can be viewed.

It is worth noting that the body plays an extremely important role in calligraphy, as well as in the cultivation of the self. This is not only because the act of writing relies on the movement of the body but also because Chinese philosophy holds the holistic view that the self is a whole that incorporates the body and the mind (Hung, 2018, 2020). Writing is practised through the body and is thus a refinement of the mind. In Chinese, the term for self-cultivation ‘*xiushen*’ (修身). Literally, the word 修 (*xiu*) means ‘to repair’, ‘to mend’, ‘to fix’, or ‘to embellish’, while the word 身 (*shen*) means ‘body.’ *Xiushen* literally means ‘body-fixing’, ‘body-repairing’, or ‘body cultivation’, while in its figurative sense, it denotes the cultivation of the self with one’s moral character. Many Confucian classics, such as *Mencius*, *Daxue* (*Great Learning*), *Liji* (*Book of Rites*),

and *Zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), provide numerous explications of how xiushen builds the moral character of a noble person.

## Xiushen

The term xiushen is well known in Confucian classics. In *Zhongyong*, Confucius says that xiushen includes the cultivation of the three fundamental virtues of sensibility, benevolence, and bravery.

The Master said, 'To be studious is near to sensibility. To earnestly practise is near to benevolence. To possess the sense of shame is near to bravery. He who knows these three things knows how to cultivate his own character (xiushen). Knowing how to cultivate his own character, he knows how to govern other men. Knowing how to govern other men, he knows how to govern the kingdom with all its states and families.' (Legge, 1885; my modification)<sup>1</sup>

The cultivation of a human being in Confucianism has a procedural sequence. The process starts with the cultivation of one's own character (xiushen) and expands to family management (qíjia) and to the governing of the state and, ultimately, the world. A junzi is a human being of moral character who, given the opportunity, uses his talents to serve the king in ruling the state and benefitting people. If the time is not right, a junzi just 'concentrates on the enhancement of his own moral character all alone,' which in Chinese is 獨善其身 (dú shàn qí shēn) (Legge, 1985). The exact translation of 'dú shàn qí shēn' is 'to be alone to better one's body.' As Mencius says, 'When the men of antiquity realized their wishes, benefits were conferred by them on the people. If they did not realize their wishes, they cultivated their personal character, and became illustrious in the world. If poor, they attended to their own virtue in solitude; if advanced to dignity, they made the whole kingdom virtuous as well.' (*Mencius*, 14:9; Legge, 1985).<sup>2</sup> However, Mencius does not mean improving physical health but moral quality. *Xunzi* is another prominent Confucian classic. It even contains a chapter titled 'Xiushen,' the main point of which is how to improve a person's moral character. In ancient Chinese, the words 'body,' 'self,' and 'person' are used interchangeably. Furthermore, the words 'body' (身, shēn) and 'life' (生, shēng) are used interchangeably. The Chinese term for 'lifelong' or 'lifetime' can be 終身 (Zhongshēn) or 終生 (zhongshēng). Zhōng (終) means 'end' or 'from beginning to end.' Shēng (生) refers to 'birth,' 'life,' or 'living.' In the *Analects*, Zi Gong asks, 'Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?' (Legge, 1861).<sup>3</sup> The original Chinese term for 'all one's life' is 終身. Overall, the words for 'body,' 'self,' and 'life' are used to refer to each other. The self is an embodied, living self. The cultivation of the body is the cultivation of the moral character of the self in a somatic sense. It is intriguing to find an ingenious Japanese character (kanji) that indicates the profound meaning of the process and the end of the cultivation of the embodied self—躰 (しつけ, shitsuke) (Saito, 2020). The character 躰 does not exist in Chinese. It is a uniquely Japanese kanji, which means 'discipline' (Saito, 2020). However, this word combines two Chinese characters, 身 ('body') and 美 ('beauty'), which manifest the meaning of the word—the beauty and the beautifying of the body, which in turn inform the process and the end of self-cultivation. The word 躰 demonstrates the somatic and aesthetic significance of Confucian self-cultivation, or xiushen. In this view, Chinese calligraphy is a somatic and aesthetic activity of self-cultivation.

## Practising calligraphy as a means of xiushen

Chinese calligraphy is a special somatic activity because it uses a brush to write. Paintbrushes are also used in oil painting, but the way the brush is used is different from the way it is used to write Chinese characters. In oil painting, pigments are placed on the painting surface by using repeated brush strokes, and there is often more than one layer of paint. In contrast, the

creation of Chinese calligraphy relies on each brush stroke. Every stroke matters. The movement of every part of the artist's body makes a difference in writing. As Shusterman (2018, p. 86) notes, 'the creation of skilled brush strokes involves not only the hand wielding the brush but the soma (or *shen*) as a whole: one's vision, proprioceptive and kinesthetic feelings, one's energy, balance, breathing, and emotions—all influence the quality of the brush stroke.' Every stroke reflects the calligrapher's emotions, physical feelings, and mental condition. More importantly, the calligrapher's moral quality is revealed in the strokes. The notion that 'the work of calligraphy is who and what the calligrapher is' (書如其人) is deeply embedded in Chinese traditional culture. 'Calligraphy shows the quality of one's achievement in the arts. ... it also marks the level of one's moral development' (Hung, 2018, p. 63). The Sòng dynasty poet Su Shì (1037–1101) says, 'Either beautiful or ugly, a calligraphic work can tell the moral character of the calligrapher. It is beyond question that beautiful brush-writing must be created by a noble person and ugly brush-writing must be created by a mean person' (Hua, 1997, p. 288; my translation).<sup>4</sup> Calligraphy is believed to reveal the truth about the calligrapher's personality—whether one is an upright or despicable person—because the stroke is a living somatic expression. Art critique of calligraphy always involves a moral judgement of the artist. Although making moral judgements based on one's calligraphic virtue is debatable, it is plausible to claim that practising calligraphy does improve certain virtues, such as patience, self-restraint, diligence, and carefulness (Hung, 2018). Chinese calligraphy is a time-consuming and highly demanding task. It takes years of practice to achieve mastery. However, it is not only mastery but also a unique and authentic style that makes a calligrapher great. Let me elaborate on this point by highlighting two aspects of calligraphic greatness: the practical and the quintessential aspect.

Regarding practice, there are two main methods for achieving a mastery of calligraphy skills: imitation of past masters' works and constant practice (Hung, 2018). A learner spends years imitating and continuously practising to acquire these skills. This process of incorporating past masterpieces and developing one's own style is a means of cultivating the self aesthetically and metaphysically. Shusterman (2018) makes two interesting observations regarding the somatic dimension of the use of the brush. First, there are analogies between bodily parts and writing tools. Ink and water are analogous to bodily fluids, such as blood and lymph; the hairs of the brush are analogous to human hair and skin; and the hard bamboo stem is analogous to bones and the skeletal frame. Second, brush strokes are often described in somatic terms, such as bones, flesh, blood, arteries, sinew, and bone marrow. These physiological terms reflect the importance of the body in the process of writing. Hence, we can agree with Billeter (1990) that there is a 'body sense' underlying the activity of brush writing. This can be understood as a sense that 'enables the calligrapher to 'give body' to the character and as a sense *belonging to the body*' (Billeter, 1990, p. 38). Furthermore, this body sense allows the form of the character 'to be a representation of [the calligrapher's] body' (Billeter, 1990, p. 41). In other words, in the process of writing, the body sense enables the somatic movement of the calligrapher, the formation of characters, and the projection of the calligrapher's personality on the work. The acquisition of supreme calligraphy skills is a process of cultivating the body. During this process, the calligrapher's body develops a relationship with the self and the world through constant practice. Continuous practice habituates and incorporates the calligrapher's body by fitting an inner spatialisation and the space on the paper. It is the very practice that engages the calligrapher in the world and enables them to project themselves on the work. As Billeter (1990, p. 156) notes, 'the phenomenon of projection is one of the mainsprings of calligraphy, but also one of the fundamental mechanisms of our subjective life in general. It informs the point where the roots of calligraphic art and those of all our lived experience are intertwined.' As the calligrapher achieves mastery, their work becomes a nexus between the body/self and the world, especially nature.

Regarding the quintessential aspect, there is a core concept in Chinese literary and art culture, 'Tien-ré-hé-yì' (天人合一, 'the harmony between humanity and nature') (Hung, 2019). The

art of calligraphy pursues the realisation of the belief that nature, art, and the artist are interconnected (Ying, 2012). In this view, the finest calligraphy must be natural and authentic. For example, despite the centuries separating them, the official scholar of the Eastern Hàn dynasty Tsài Yong (133–192 CE) and the literary critic Líu Xizǎi (1813–1881 CE) both embrace the notion that ‘calligraphy is generated from the nature’ (Hung, 2020, p. 166). According to Tsài Yong, nature involves the natural forces of yin and yang and the underlying dynamics. During the process of writing, Tien-ré-hé-yi is embodied in the calligrapher as a person and in the brushwork. Harmony between humanity and nature is achieved when the calligrapher wields the brush in accordance with the interaction of natural forces. The calligrapher’s movement and gestures follow natural change and rhythm. The calligrapher follows nature not only physically but also mentally. Tsài Yong writes:

Before writing, one must meditate and contemplate. Go as the heart goes. Keep words within. Breathe peacefully. Be fully mindful in a most solemn manner. Then the writing cannot be ugly. The calligrapher must embody themselves into the words [in their mind] in order to write well. The words [and the postures and gestures] are like sitting or walking, flying or moving, coming and going, lying down or getting up, being depressed or being joyful, insects eating leaves, sharp swords and halberds, nice bows and arrows, water and fire, clouds and mists, the sun and the moon. Only when the calligrapher [and the written word] freely plays around the images can the finest calligraphy be produced. (Hua, 1997, p. 6)<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, calligraphy and the calligrapher, art and the artist are one. The refinement of artistic skills and artwork is the cultivation of the self through the pursuit of harmony between the human being and nature. In the Chinese artistic tradition, calligraphy and ink wash painting are considered ‘cognates.’ One of the fundamental themes of traditional Chinese painting is nature—natural landscapes. Landscape painting illustrates how the artist contemplates nature, which, as Shusterman (2018) aptly observes, is a deep reflection of oneself. ‘This means that the contemplation of nature’s beauties, if one’s attention is genuinely profound and heart-felt, will contain some reflection of how those scenes make [sic] one feel’ (Shusterman, 2018, p. 97).

In Chinese tradition, painting and writing are both significant media for the self-cultivation of literati. The act of using the brush provides the bodily and mental discipline necessary to attain harmony with nature. Artistic writing is a path to the refinement of personality through the peaceful and mindful union between human beings and nature, which includes the contemplation, identification, and expression of nature. Chinese culture holds a special place for self-cultivation through the embodiment of art.

## Notes

1. 好學近乎知，力行近乎仁，知恥近乎勇。知斯三者，則知所以修身；知所以修身，則知所以治人；知所以治人，則知所以治天下國家矣。(中庸, 21)
2. 古之人，得志，澤加於民；不得志，脩身見於世。窮則獨善其身，達則兼善天下。(孟子, 14:9)
3. 有一言而可以終身行之者乎？(論語, 15:24).
4. 書有工拙，而君子小人之心，不可亂也。(蘇軾，論書) (Hua, 1997, p. 288).
5. 夫書，先默坐靜思，隨意所適；言不出口，氣不盈息；沉密神彩，如對至尊，則無不善矣。為書之體，須入其形，若坐若行，若飛若動，若往若來，若臥若起，若愁若喜，若蟲食木葉，若利劍長戈，若強弓硬矢，若水火，若雲霧，若日月，縱橫有可象者，方得謂之書矣。(蔡邕，書論)

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