



Analysis of "Taste": Serves as the Aesthetic Experience of Calligraphy

Xinyue Xing*

Chinese Calligraphy Culture Research Institute, Capital Normal University, Beijing, 100048, China

*Corresponding author: xingxinyue@sdsfdx.wecom.work

Abstract. "Taste", in Chinese called "Wei", in traditional literature and art criticism occupies an important position. As the concrete manifestations in the spirit of Chinese calligraphy art, "taste" can be used to assess various types of literature and artworks, as well as expound art theory. After the Eastern Jin Dynasty, the phenomenon of "taste of article" and "taste of calligraphy" appeared. Compared with the former, there are fewer essays related to "taste of calligraphy" in the field of calligraphy, which is slightly behind the field of literature. When "taste" is used as a verb, it refers to experience, and in the theory of calligraphy, it refers to the way of aesthetic experience. Starting from the category theory of calligraphic experience, this paper analyses the "taste" as the aesthetic experience of calligraphy and explores its role as a link between the subject of aesthetics and the object of aesthetics. The interpretation of related theories will help students better grasp the characteristics of different calligraphic styles, and the attention and research on this issue can also promote the development of domestic and international calligraphy education and broaden new ideas for the aesthetic education of calligraphy. Discussing the development of "taste theory" in the field of calligraphy enriches Chinese traditional theory in literature and art, and will be a source of inspiration and reference for future generations of calligraphers and researchers in the field of art.

Keywords: taste of calligraphy; aesthetic experience; calligraphy appreciation

1 Introduction

"Taste", "Wei" in Mandarin, not only has a long history in China but also represents the ancient Chinese fashion of evaluating art from the perspective of sensibility and occupies a very important position in the appreciation of Chinese calligraphy. Regrettably, however, regarding the valuable cultural legacy of "taste of calligraphy", or appreciating calligraphy with words related to taste, there have not been a considerable number of monographs and essays in the field of ancient calligraphy in China in recent years, when the researcher discusses their ideas related to literature and painting discuss also "taste of calligraphy" from time to time, from which calligraphic researchers can also

gain inspiration. This paper starts from the theory of calligraphy, focuses on the neglected "taste" in the verb, expands the width and depth of the study of the taste of calligraphy, stresses the status and value of the "taste of calligraphy", and expands the perspective of calligraphy appreciation.

From the point of view of the study of the connotation of "taste", at present, there have been works of monographic study, and involves the topic of "taste of calligraphy", thinks that the Tang dynasty calligrapher Zhang Huaiguan's opinion "emphasis on spirit and light on form" comprehensively opens the "taste of calligraphy", which is very inspiring to the understanding of aesthetics and epigraphy^[1]. As for the development process of "taste", related studies have been devoted to the thesis of proving that taste can be aesthetically pleasing, but they have less to do with the topic of "taste of art"^[2]. In terms of the overall study of the theory of taste, some works focus on the theory of "aesthetics" to sort out the theory of "taste" in the ancient literary theories of China and analyze the theory of "taste" in the arts, including music, calligraphy, and poetry. The authors talk very little about the "taste of calligraphy", focusing mainly on combing history and lacking further theoretical extraction. Only the "taste" of nouns has been systematically studied, while the "taste" of verbs has been neglected^[3]. Through the literature, can see that the "taste of calligraphy" still lacks comprehensive and systematic research; from the perspective of calligraphy to explore the "taste", specializing in the study of "taste of calligraphy" still has greater space.

This paper analyses the three cases in which "taste" is used as a verb: "Pin Wei" (savor), "Yan Wei" (ponder), and "Wan Wei" (enjoy), extracts the idea of "taste of calligraphy", and transforms abstract philosophical ideas into concrete aesthetic ideas of calligraphy, to accurately understand the connotations of the theory of calligraphy, and puts forward the importance of paying attention to the way of aesthetic experience when studying the theory of calligraphy. Also, based on existing literature and implement of theories, it draws on and applies the research methods of history and literature disciplines, and analyses and arranges historical documents; This paper applies the theory of aesthetics, combines physiology, psychology, and other disciplines to expound on the aestheticism of the sense of taste. Philosophically analyses concepts and ideas related to the "taste of calligraphy", taking into account the historical and cultural backgrounds of calligraphers. This paper collects a large amount of theoretical literature on the aesthetics of taste and uses textual analyses to argue for it based on the "taste of calligraphy" itself rather than its metaphysics.

2 The Evolution of the "Taste" Category

"Taste"(Wei) is originally a physiological experience. From the word source of it in Chinese, *Shuowenjiezi* (The first Chinese dictionary to systematically analyze glyphs and their origins) defined it as flavor or taste^[4], which is the feeling of food in the mouth.

Subsequently, the Confucian theory of "Harmony and Taste" emerged, combining ethical and moral demands with the concept of "taste." The idea of "artistic judgment based on taste" originated from the field of music and later expanded into literature,

becoming an integrated inner experience that incorporates perception, imagination, and emotions. During the Southern Dynasty, literary theorists Liu Xie and Zhong Rong introduced the notion of "taste" into poetic criticism. In Liu Xie's work, "taste" was used merely as a general concept without reaching the level of aesthetic appreciation. On the other hand, Zhong Rong proposed the theory of "aesthetic taste", elevating "taste" to a complete aesthetic category. Concurrently, the painter Zong Bing pioneered the concept of "appreciating art based on taste" in the world of painting.

Western aesthetics and Chinese critics differ greatly in their conceptions of whether or not "taste" has aesthetic properties. Kant explicitly stated that "every man has his distinctive taste ^[5]"; he denied the aesthetic power of taste and concluded that the behavior triggered by this sensory perception is a pleasure.

"Pure aesthetics does not depend on stimulation, and if an act called 'appreciation' is mixed with stimulation and excitement, it is always barbarous ^[5]." The desire of the mouth and tongue is precisely the product of the stimulation that the object produces in the tongue and the taste system. The pleasure that the subject expresses towards the object occurs through sensory stimulation, and it is impure. It is impure, associated with interests, and strongly subjective and personal, contrary to the non-utilitarian and universal nature of aesthetics. It is impure, associated with the desire for profit and loss, and strongly subjective and personal, contrary to the non-utilitarian and universal nature of aesthetics, and therefore cannot be called beautiful, which is how Kant denied the aesthetics of the sense of taste.

It seems that Kant intended to include that kind of connoisseurial judgment combined with the senses to appear as part of the aesthetic performed by the senses, but he was unable to find a definitive way to prove it ^[6]. The distance between the senses and the sensed object is the basic factor that defines whether it constitutes an aesthetic activity.

"Taste" as an ancient and vibrant traditional Chinese aesthetic category, transcends the mere sensory enjoyment of taste and evolves into a universal and interconnected aesthetic concept. It represents the aesthetic experience derived from sensations and further becomes one of the methods of appreciating calligraphy art. This interconnection of sensory perceptions, as described by the literary figure Qian Zhongshu, is referred to as "synesthesia". In calligraphy appreciation, this synesthetic experience not only expands one's imagination but also deepens the viewer's appreciation and understanding of the artwork.

3 The Double Lexical Nature of "Taste"

The noun lexical "taste" refers to the aesthetic characteristics of calligraphy works; "taste" as a verb refers to experience, and in the theory of calligraphy, refers to the way of aesthetic experience.

3.1 Noun Attributes

When "taste" is used as a noun, it refers to the aesthetic characteristics and aesthetic qualities of an aesthetic object, and at this time, "taste" has the double meaning of the sensual expression of calligraphic style and the generalization of the internal principles of calligraphy. As an empirical description, calligraphy theorists often use words such as "sour" "sweet" "bitter" "spicy" "greasy" and "astringent" embodying the qualities of the work directly. When calligraphy theorists intend to convey the inner quality of calligraphy, they use abstract terms such as "harmonious taste", "humilis taste", "flavor" and more to express their deep inner experience. For example, Zhang Huaiguan, a calligraphy theorist in the Tang Dynasty, used the noun attribute of "taste" in his *ShuDuan* (a book comment on calligraphers and calligraphy). He thought that although Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy was very calm and peaceful, it lacked flavor ^[7], which means that the appearance of the work is good, but due to the lack of internal quality, it loses charm. "Flavor" in this case refers to charm. Emperor Gaozong of Song in *HanMo Zhi* (a book comment on calligraphers and calligraphy) said that Wang Xizhi's calligraphy has a "true taste", the longer the time, the longer the taste ^[8], the "taste" can also be used to indicate the "rhyme". Jiang Kui, a calligraphy theorist in the Song Dynasty, in *Xushupu* (a book comment on calligraphers and calligraphy) mentioned that the lines with the stroke can show the spirit of the work. In contrast, the lines hide the stroke containing the taste ^[9]. "Taste" here can be replaced by "momentum", which not only refers to the ink that has already been formed but also points to the future direction of the ink.

3.2 Verb Attributes

The verb form of "taste" establishes an aesthetic approach in ancient Chinese calligraphy that emphasizes communication and imagery. In his doctoral thesis, "A Study on the Category System of Calligraphy Aesthetics," Fan Yuguang accurately elaborated on the distinct value of "taste" as an aesthetic category with both noun and verb attributes: Within the traditional Chinese aesthetic category, there are numerous words like "rhyme" and "fun" that share some similarities with "taste" and can even to some extent be used interchangeably. However, the brilliance of "taste" lies in its verb attribute, signifying an aesthetic activity involving savoring and distinguishing it from "rhyme" and "fun," which are restricted to noun usage. In the realm of traditional Chinese calligraphy aesthetics, there are scarce verbs like "taste," "appreciate," or "experience" to express aesthetic activities ^[10].

The earliest use of "taste" as a verb is Wang Xizhi, the most famous calligrapher of the Eastern Jin Dynasty; in his *Lunshu* (A book discusses calligraphy), said only with the eyes not enough, so people need to taste to experience ^[7]. Since then, a growing number of calligraphy theorists focused on the implication and spirit of calligraphy, as an aesthetic experience, "taste" is a large number of applications in calligraphy theory, and most of the time the "taste" as an affix, did not express the core meaning of the word. Combined with other words it shows the different meanings of the tendency.

3.2.1. "Pin Wei"

"Pin Wei" in pinyin, refers to "savor". In Chinese ancient aesthetics, another way of expressing "Wei" is "Pin". The word "Pin" is not only about rank and appraisal but also contains the element of "savor", which can be regarded as a different wording of the category of "taste". Calligraphy art appreciation, different from the West, it does not only rely on intuition but more on quiet observation, that is, on the one hand, through a period to gaze at the view, on the other hand also needs to communicate with the works of art in the forgetfulness, really experiencing the spirit of its connotation. Perhaps it is for this reason that the ancients often used "Pin" to name this process, the meaning of which is very profound.

From the "bureaucratic systems of recommendation" to select officials in the Han Dynasty to the "Nine-grade System" during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the assessment of candidates' character was integral to the process. This method of talent selection initially served political needs, but it later acquired a strong aesthetic dimension. In *Shi Shuo Xin Yu*, a type of record of the words, deeds, and anecdotes of historical figures, numerous sentences are devoted to describing the disposition, manners, and thoughts of individuals, reflecting a pursuit of beauty. As the aesthetician Zong Baihua argued, Chinese aesthetics originated from the appreciation of the beauty of one's character ^[11].

Thus, the concept of "Pin" shapes the expression of preference and ranking in Chinese aesthetic theory. In the realm of Chinese calligraphy criticism, many theoretical works were named after "Pin", like Yu Jianwu's *Shu Pin* (the Appraisals of Calligraphy) in the Southern Dynasty and Li Sizhen's *Shuhou Pin* (One More Work of Appraisals of Calligraphy), both are appraisals of calligraphers and their works. Yang Jing, a calligraphy theorist from the Qing Dynasty, authored "Twenty-four Calligraphy Styles", while modern scholar Jin Xuezhi, building on the study of calligraphic styles by his predecessors, proposed the "New Twenty-four Calligraphy Styles" in his "Chinese Calligraphy Aesthetics".

The classification of artworks into various "Pin" is a summary of aesthetic practices based on taste. Overall, the aesthetic approach of "taste" is characterized by considerable uncertainty and ambiguity. However, in the process of transforming "Wei" into "Pin", ancient critics demonstrated a theoretical awareness of rationally summarizing and expressing sensory aesthetic activities. It's worth noting that Zhang Fa in his *Chinese Aesthetic History* pointed out that although "Pin" can replace "Wei" to express "experience" or "appreciation", "Pin" possesses a graded consciousness that "Wei" does not have ^[12].

3.2.2. "Yan Wei"

"Yan Wei" in pinyin, refers to "ponder". The original meaning of "Yan Wei" is to grind. Used in an abstract sense, it means to analyze or ponder over and over again. The "Yan Wei" is a high-level requirement for understanding the beauty of calligraphy.

When discussing the path to enlightenment in his *Pingshuyaoshilun* (a book on calligraphic theory), Zhang Huaiguan mentioned that if one carefully ponders a work of calligraphy, there will be something that touches the viewer's heart ^[7]. Contemporary philosophical scholar Gong Huanan, in his article "The Shape of the Calligraphy and Metaphysics - Visual Transcendence and its Destiny in the Calligraphy" put forward

that the "Yan Wei" is a kind of transcendence of "Mu Jian" which is merely viewing with the eyes^[1]. Chen Si, a Song dynasty scholar of literature, in his *Baokecongbian* (a book about inscriptions) mentioned that when he appreciated the Jiangnan landscape inscription "ponder repeatedly^[13]", The "repeatedly" points out that the connoisseur has to experience many times to truly understand the inscriptions. Jiang Kui, a Southern Song dynasty scholar of literature, lamented that today's people have lost the ability to ponder the *Xuanshibiao* (an important calligraphy by Wang Xizhi)^[14]. There are several demands on the connoisseur's qualities, such as Inspirational, wise, and spiritual. Therefore, achieving "Yan Wei" level of appreciation is not easy.

3.2.3 "Wan Wei"

"Wan Wei" in pinyin, refers to "play" or "enjoy". The "Yan" of "Yan Wei" reflects the depth of appreciation, while the "Wan" of "Wan Wei" reflects a kind of lively and free aesthetic state, the two differing in duration and degree of refinement. In the context of general daily life, "play" is usually not a positive word, and most of the time it represents a kind of non-serious and informal attitude. However, when "Wan" and "Wei" are combined to form "Wan Wei", which can have a richer and deeper philosophical meaning. Modern philosopher Liu Gangji was keenly aware of the fact that in ancient Chinese aesthetics, one could not find such words as "aesthetic" or "sense of beauty", but only words such as "playing" and "enjoyment". Ancient Chinese aesthetics never denied that the creation of aesthetic pleasure is related to the feeling of external objects, but it is not a passive feeling. Aesthetic pleasure is a sense of joy in life resulting from subject-object interactions^[15]. Therefore, "Wan Wei" in traditional Chinese aesthetics mostly expresses physiological pleasure, but it is not limited to the sense, and the ultimate goal is to express inner satisfaction and aesthetic enrichment through the sense experience. In the theory of calligraphy, "Wan Wei" is often used to describe experiencing the emotions of the former calligrapher when creating calligraphy, so that have a spiritual dialogue with the ancients.

Zhao Mengfu, a renowned calligrapher of the Yuan Dynasty, wrote postscripts of *Orchid Pavilion Preface* and stated, "To study the antiquity calligraphy one must enjoy. That's how it helps to improve oneself"^[16]. Zhao Mengfu realized that Wang Xizhi in the creation of *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, infiltrated the experience of nature and life. His emotional experience could be gained only through "enjoy". Besides, only appreciated the mindset of the ancients during creation followed by realizing ancients' techniques and inksmanship. In the Ming Dynasty, calligrapher Dong Qichang combined "enjoy" with Zen thought, and believed that only through the accumulation of "enjoyment" could one achieve "enlightenment" and reach the realm of the "unity of heaven and man"^[17]. So that the learner no longer focuses entirely on the "horizontal and vertical" fitted with ancients, but beyond this imitation and across the boundaries of time and space, reach a spiritual resonance with the previous calligrapher. It is for this reason that "enjoying" the works of predecessors is often regarded as a necessary path for the practitioner, which can unify aesthetic cognition, sensibility, and rationality.

It should be added that "Yan" and "Wan" can also form a new word, "Yan Wan" (ponder and enjoy), which also denotes a kind of calligraphic creative activity. It indicates that those who create and appreciate calligraphy possess a clear and bright mind.

In the Southern Song Dynasty, Yu He, a chancellor, praised Emperor Ming's study of calligraphy in his *Lunshubiao* as a state of "Yan Wan"^[5]. *Lunshubiao* is an article written by Yu He to Emperor Ming of Song. Emperor Ming of Song was fond of literature and art. He had ordered to seek the handwriting of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, ordering Yu He, Chao Shangzhi, Xu Xixiu, and Sun Fengbo to collate and comment on them. In the article, Yu He praised the Ming emperor's rapid progress and calm state of mind. Song Mingdi, as a king, had a lot of work to do, but the creation and enjoyment of art required total dedication, free from the constraints of utilitarianism. The reason why Emperor Ming was able to make great progress in the study of calligraphy in a few months was inseparable from his ability to "Yan Wan".

4 Conclusion

This paper highlights the ancient calligraphy theorists' ability to discuss calligraphy using the concept of "taste" and identifies two main factors that enable this approach. Firstly, there are similarities between the sense of taste and the appreciation of calligraphy. Secondly, there is a need for visual representation to articulate theoretical thinking. The "hold" from Laozi's statement "Hold nature simple and indifferent" aligns with the "taste" in "taste of calligraphy," both serving as means to explore abstract truths through observing human bodies. China's rich food culture provides the cultural foundation for the "taste theory," making it easier for individuals to empathize with the "taste of calligraphy."

What sets this paper apart from other calligraphy theory articles is its wider perspective and novel angle of discussion. By exploring "taste" as the aesthetic experience of calligraphy, the paper aims to promote calligraphy education both domestically and internationally and generate innovative ideas for its development. However, delving into the essence of the "taste of calligraphy" within numerous calligraphy theories demands a researcher with considerable sensitivity. Furthermore, a thorough analysis of the "taste of calligraphy" encompasses various disciplines such as philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and literature, requiring the researcher to be well-versed in these fields throughout Chinese ancient, modern, and contemporary times.

Acknowledging the scarcity of papers on the topic of "taste of calligraphy" for reference, the researcher had to rely on their exploration while composing this paper. Nonetheless, the paper strives to preserve and organize the heritage of calligraphy theory, with the aspiration that the field of calligraphy can embrace a fresh perspective in understanding the concept of "taste of calligraphy."

Reference

1. Gong, H. (2022). *General Studies Philosophy of Taste*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
2. Nie, X. (2018). *The Aestheticisation course of taste*. Shanghai: Shanghai Normal University.
3. Tao, L. (2017). *Artistic flavor*. Tianjin: Baihuazhou Literature and Art.
4. Xu, S. (2021). *Shuowenjiezi*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books.

5. Michel, C. (2017). *Thinking with Kant's critique of judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University.
6. Cassirer, W H. (2020). *A commentary on Kant's critique of judgment*. London: Taylor and Francis.
7. Zhang, Y. (2021). *Fashuyaolu*. Shanghai: Beijing:Zhong Hua Book Company.
8. Li, T. (2015). *Classical epigraphic theories of the ages interpreted and read*. Nanjing: Nanjing Southeast University.
9. East China Normal University Ancient Books Arrangement and Research Office. (1979). *Selected essays on calligraphy through the ages*. Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting.
10. Fan, Y. (2019). A study on category system of calligraphy aesthetics. Hebei:Hebei University.
11. Zong, B. (2022). *Strolling in Aesthetics*. Beijing: People's Literature..
12. Zhang, F. (2020). *Chinese Aesthetics History Revised edition*. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
13. Chen, S. (1984). *Baokecongbian*. Beijing: Beijing Library.
14. Wang, D. (2020). A commoner all-rounder who travels in the rivers and lakes. Changchun: Jilin People's Publishing House.
15. Liu, G. (2021). The History Of Chinese Aesthetics. Shanghai: Oriental Publishing Center.
16. East China Normal University Ancient Books Arrangement and Research Office. (1979). *Sequel to selected essays on calligraphy through the ages*. Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting.
17. Dong, Q. (2010). *Rongtaiji*. Hangzhou: Xiling Seal Engravers Society.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

