

## A Study on the Relationship Between Chinese Calligraphy and Painting in the Painter Colony of the 20th Century: a Case Study of Zhang Daqian

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### Abstract

Based on the different opinions of the relationship between Chinese calligraphy and painting in the painter colony of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can divide the painter colony in the 20<sup>th</sup> century into three kinds: calligraphic techniques into painting, abandon calligraphy from painting, painting techniques into calligraphy, and Zhang Daqian's art has its specific characteristic of calligraphic techniques into painting, that is, his calligraphy emphasizes on copy and artistic law, the technique borrowing of calligraphy in his painting is not obvious, and there is no apparent trace of "painter's viewpoint". Meanwhile, he also makes a learn and absorb from Western painting, but the learning of Western painting can't make him abandon calligraphy from painting. The peculiarity of the relationship between calligraphy and painting in Zhang Daqian's works derives from his deep understanding of the relationship between calligraphy and painting, and we need to grasp the context of painting history, clarify the time that calligraphy steps in painting and the way that calligraphy affects painting.

**Key words:** The relationship between calligraphy and painting; Calligraphic techniques into painting; Influence and reference; Artistic independence

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### INTRODUCTION

Owing to a series of revolutions on political, economic, and ideology fields in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, distinct times characterized the development of Chinese painting at that time, and under the background of Chinese painting and Western painting integration, it presented a trend of diversified development, so, different painter colonies held different opinions about the relationship between calligraphy and painting: some painters approved of calligraphy, proposed the theory of calligraphic techniques into painting, some painters denied calligraphy, advocated abandon calligraphy from painting, some painters followed the traditions, contended the integration of calligraphy and painting. This article tries to research the different views of the relationship between calligraphy and painting in different painter colonies, and focuses on the relationship presented in Zhang Daqian's art, then attempts to reveal the correct relationship that is beneficial to the development of calligraphy and painting art, and inspire the development of contemporary Chinese painting.

### 1. FUNDAMENTAL TYPES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY AND PAINTING IN THE PAINTER COLONY OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Based on the differences in the relationship between Chinese calligraphy and painting in the painter colony of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can divide the painter colony in the 20<sup>th</sup> century into three kinds: calligraphic techniques into painting, abandon calligraphy from painting, painting techniques into calligraphy, and the next sections describe the three kinds respectively.

### 1.1 Calligraphic Techniques Into Painting

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some painters proposed follow the example of seal character and official script in the learning of calligraphy, and the sense of vigorous and stylish in seal character and majuscul seal script appeared in paintings, in the concept of calligraphy, there presented a epigraphic aesthetic tendency, the representative individuals are Wu Changshuo, Qi Baishi, Huang Binhong, Li Keran, Pan Tianshou and so on. These painters inherited the tradition of calligraphic techniques into painting in literati paintings that originated in Ming and Qing Dynasty, and they advocated that the painters should have high calligraphic attainments, all of the instance, Wu Changshuo believed that painting derived from calligraphy, an extremely excellent art which will never be unnecessary. Huang Binhong went even further; he believed calligraphy is the mother of painting: "painting is almost like handwriting, and the tools for Chinese painting as painting brush and ink are all borrowed from calligraphy" (Huang, 1999). Under the influence of tablet calligraphy theory, those painters' writing style was imprinted with distinctive marks of their time. "After the rein of Qian Long and Jia Qing, epigraphy sprang up. At that time, calligraphers like Deng Wanbai, Bao Shenbo and He Shaoji all proposed promoting tablet calligraphy of Qin, Han and Northern Wei Dynasty. In contrast, Jin Dongxin, Zhao Huiquan and Wu Foulou absorbed tablet calligraphy into calligraphy, implanting it with new characters of powerfulness, satiation, simplicity and luxuriance." They wrote on drawing papers with distinct tablet style. I hereby conclude it as tablet-oriented painter group. Besides, in the painter group of last century, some advocated applying calligraphy skills to painting, while their expressions were different from the former painters we had just discussed. They learnt widely from other's points, made beautiful and elegant handwritings, and admitted Wang Xizhi's and his son Wang Xianzhi's dominating role in calligrapher circles. They attached great importance on training and cultivation in many more other fields, and applied to their drawing productions in return. Wu Hufan and Fu Xinshe are main representatives of this group. Distinctive from the tablet-oriented painter group, although this group agreed with applying calligraphy skills to painting, they paid more attention to learning its sprits and principles rather than techniques and styles. I hereby conclude this one as Classic group.

### 1.2 Out of the Shadow of Handwriting

Due to the historical and social earthquake in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese painting witnessed a great series of transformation of itself. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century is a period of learning from western painting, during which China's cultural elites opened a furious debate on the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese painting. They started to reflect on the weakness of traditional paintings, meanwhile, some painters who advocated reform began to put the

blame on its connection with handwriting. Lin Fengmian thought that Chinese painting had been thrown into a chaos, in which all painters tried to simplify their drawing objects. He also believed the intervention into painting of calligraphy is one important reason. In his view, it's a duty for future paintings to express real feelings, thus tools and technique reformation become a must. He also pointed out, "Why our painters always can't help stepping into the dead end of tradition, apery and cheat? It is probably because of the materials and tools we use make us have no better options. For instance, the paper, pigment and painting brush we used for drawing are exactly the same with those for handwriting; as a result, we paint with calligraphy skills and rules. Should we stick to rigid tradition and make no improvement merely because we get used to it?" Wu Guanzhong, Lin Fengmian's student, inherited his tutor's viewpoint. His deceleration of "handwriting is nothing to do with painting" has drawn enormous attention in modern art circle. Though the "handwriting" here is actually "isolated handwriting separated from specific picture", his bold negation of handwriting impacted many painters: Many modern Chinese painters lack calligraphy skills. They think calligraphy is bad for their production and manage to shake off the so-called restraints. We can conclude this group as "out of the shadow of handwriting" group.

### 1.3 Absorbing Painting Skills Into Handwriting

Besides the two painter groups we just mentioned above, there were plenty of painters of 20<sup>th</sup> century trying to apply painting skills to calligraphy. They learnt either space sense and composition sense or the use of ink and water from painting, which made their calligraphy work full of romantic charm of pictures. To pursue formalistic integrity, they even scarify the integrity of characters and neglect its readability. To be specific, among painters who hold this viewpoint and put it into practice, some made it, while some broke it. Winners insisted on a calligraphy-oriented position, made merits of painting serve for handwriting, and enriched the visionary world of the latter's, thus influenced contemporary calligraphy creation and theory. Especially since 1980s, with the wide spread of modern calligraphy movements and the prevalence of calligraphy displays, the tendency became more and more adoptable. Losers equated handwriting with painting, dismembered the artistic independence of calligraphy, which brought negative effects to the progress of calligraphy.

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## 2. A CASE STUDY: PAINTINGS ABSORBED HANDWRITING SKILLS—RESEARCH ON PAINTING AND HANDWRITING RELATIONSHIP IN ZHANG DAQIAN'S WORK

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From the perspective of relationship between painting and handwriting, I briefly introduced the main painter groups

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the following, I will make a further illustration on this point by studying a controversial but far-reaching painter of last century, Zhang Daqian. I choose him as an individual case for his particular and representative painting and handwriting characters, which is manifested as the followings:

First, like Qi Baishi and Wu Changshuo, Zhang attached great importance on handwriting training and study. He believed that it's a duty that must be fulfilled by painters to study calligraphy. It means a lot to painters:

Zhu Da, a famous painter of the Ming Dynasty said, "Wu Tao-tzu (a famous painter of the Tang Dynasty) studied calligraphy from Zhang Dian and failed, then he paid attention to painting and made great achievement." Thus I know, combined with handwriting skills, I can make my painting a masterpiece. I keep the words as a proverb and practice it (Zhang, 1986).

As far as I'm concerned, painting is a piece of cake, while handwriting is like fish in the air. Once wrote incorrectly, the whole painting is destroyed, too. Therefore, painters must learn handwriting first (Ba, 1987).

To produce wonderful painting, one must have very solid calligraphy foundation first before mastering the method of using ink pen perfectly. To conclude, a good painter is skilled in poem, calligraphy and painting (Li, 2005).

Though they all proposed learning from handwriting, compared with Chi Baishi's and Wu Changshuo's points, Zhang's view had its distinctive characters. The handwriting and painting relationship in Zhang's work presented a different state. In the formers' painting works, it's very likely to find ink lines as rich and powerful as those in their handwriting works. They applied handwriting skills to painting directly, making their work abstract and mysterious. While in the latter's works, this phenomenon is not clear, it's much more similar to the situation of Wu Hufan and Fu Xinchu, the classic group.

Second, under the trend of modern art thought of last century, Chinese painters faced many challenges posed by the western art shock. In the process of reflection, choice and integration, many of them managed to rescue Chinese painting circle through learning the realism spirit and artistic independence from western world. For example, Xu Beihong, a close friend of Zhang Daqian, had a long-term experience of studying abroad. Under the atmosphere of the introduction of western art to the east, inevitably, Zhang was influenced by his time. Spending years traveling and studying abroad since his middle age, he had a wide understanding toward Japanese and Indian painting and western abstractionism and realism. That explains why he was always so inclusive to foreign arts. His painting works produced in the 1960s might be the closest one to the westerner's from a perspective of abstractionism. In his later years, he successfully created the splash-ink and splash-color landscape painting by

using modern western painting skills. But he used western skills only under the condition of a keen understanding of traditional Chinese painting, in his own words, "one should properly absorb merits of western art into our own production, while the work is still Chinese work, without any western features from its appearance" (Ba, 1996). While learning from the west, he firmly insisted the national consciousness and independent role of Chinese painting and kept an enthusiasm on Chinese painting brush and rice paper as its main tool and material. In Zhang's generation, there was another painter called Lue Fengzi who held a similar view, "Chinese painting must be based on a painter's feeling and thought, thus the best tool to generate a good painting is brush made of animal hair which can freely transmit a painter's strength of his shoulder, arm and wrist. A finger or brush made of other materials can only produce lines lacking changing ability" (Lu, 2005). Though it's just an independent thought of his own, Zhang Daqian identified Lue's statement through his art practice.

Compared with those painters who advocated improving handwriting by learning from painting, Zhang's writing method, process and the final artwork appearance seemed more like what a real calligrapher would have gone through. His painting didn't influence his handwriting very much, or to say there was less "painter preference" in his calligraphy than that in his contemporaries'. Those painters had a strong sense of composition; they created handwriting work with painting techniques and principles, which was totally different from Zhang. On the contrary, what we see in Zhang's calligraphy is a perfect combination of techniques of stipple, structure and ancient Fateh. When we compared Zhang's calligraphy with Gao Jianfu's, the representative of Lingnan School, it's not hard to recognize their differences.

Fragmentary lines, random structure, strange transformation, completely break rules-neither conform to the orthodox rules of Jin and Tang dynasty, nor to the wild styles of Han and Wei dynasty. Some people believe it's an expression of individuality, perhaps it's right for Gao Jianfu himself, but we consider it as an exaggeration in most cases. Can such a thing be called calligraphy? The truth is most calligraphers doubt it (Chen, 1996).

Compared with Gao Jianfu, Zhang was more conservative about copying and creating calligraphy works, as a result of the artistic thought of valuing tradition and copy, his works were much more closer to traditional calligraphers'. He attached great importance on copying good painting models. Recognized as representative of traditional painting group, he spent much time and energy on copying excellent painting models of variety of schools from Six Dynasties Period to Ming and Qing. As for calligraphy, he did the same. In his early years, he learnt tablet calligraphy from Li Ruiqing and Zeng Xi and benefited a lot from Yi He



Ming, Shek mun Ming, Zheng Wen Gong and many other tablet calligraphies. Meanwhile, he also persevered in studying calligraphy works of Su Shi, Mi Fu and Huang Tingjian and carefully copying handwriting models of Shi Tao, Zhu Da, Tang Yan and Zhao Mengfu. Obsessed with tradition, Zhang's calligraphy had both strength of tablet style and grace of Tie style, eventually formed the typical calligraphy of "Daqian" style.

### 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAINTING AND CALLIGRAPHY RELATIONS WITH TIMES, SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT PAINTING AND CALLIGRAPHY RELATIONS IN ZHANG DAQIAN'S ART

It's not hard to see that the painting and calligraphy's relations of Zhang have similarities with that of three main painter groups in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while it has its own individuality: Different from Wu Changshuo, in Zhang's painting, calligraphy seems hiding somewhere, not as obvious as the former. Compared with Wu Hufan, Zhang was bold enough to learn from the west, at the same time, he didn't end up in the extreme of abandoning calligraphy for painting; compared with those who excessively applied painting skills to calligraphy, Zhang attached great importance on copy and rules, from such a perspective, Zhang is abnormal.

The reason why Zhang Daqian has distinctive personalities and is different from each of the other three painter groups lies in his keen perception of the relationships between painting and handwriting. To reveal the answer, we have to briefly introduce the history of painting development and when calligraphy begins to influence painting. It's hard to give a clear answer to when painting and calligraphy started influencing each other in the art history. But when we look into painting theories of different generations, we find plenty of statements about the same origin of painting and calligraphy, or about the importance of the latter to the former:

The essence of painting lies in similarity in form; similarity in form lies in spirit; spirit lies in the feelings and thoughts of painters, and all these factors depend on brush, thus excellent painters are good at handwriting (Yu, 2007).

In Zhang Hongyuan's view, one important criterion to judge a painting is its similarity in form. However, the pursuit of similarity in form is not the ultimate end of painting art. Another requirement for a good painting work is spirit-resonance, and the only way to meet the requirement is using painting brush proficiently and precisely. Hence, painters need to study calligraphy. In *All Precious Dynasties Painting Record*, it tells: Wu Daoxuan, a famous painter with excellent gift in Tang dynasty, made greater achievement than others no matter whether they

are the precious, contemporary or coming generations. He worked as Zhang Xu's handwriting teacher (Zhang Xu, China's famous calligrapher) (Shen, 1982).

Zhang Yanyuan provided an example of painters learning from calligraphers. Conversely, since technique of drawing is more variable than that of calligraphy, calligraphers also need to learn from painters. Does it mean that painting brush and writing brush can replace each other? According to painting and calligraphy works in Tang and in dynasties before Tang, the answer is negative. People in the Tang dynasty focused on the similarity in principles between painting and calligraphy, but not similarity in certain techniques. In painting history, no matter Jing, Guan, Dong and Ju in The Five Dynasties, or Fan Kuan, Li Cheng in Song and Yuan dynasty, all these painters were not famous for calligraphy. They had talents for mastering techniques of painting and for creating excellent works-the techniques they used were very similar to those of calligraphy.

When did calligraphy techniques directly intervene in painting and influence painting history? The turning point of painting techniques appeared in Yuan dynasty, especially since the prevalence of literati painting and literati painting theory as well as the fact that the thought of calligraphy-based painting was proposed and became popular. Calligraphy techniques not only enriched the expressional language of Chinese painting, but also made it realistic. Such techniques won't make a painting less real, simultaneously; they conform to a painter's feelings and thoughts. On their older generation's shoulders, literati painters in Ming and Qing dynasty made calligraphy technique a top priority. In the late Qing Dynasty, tablet calligraphy got popular, once again, painters' expressional language was enriched by techniques of tablet style, which influenced the development of painting greatly.

But every coin has two sides. The thought of developing painting by learning from calligraphy is also a sword of two edges. On one hand, it strengthens painting techniques; on the other hand, it causes the picture lacking of change. Most importantly, it results in a complicate situation, in which rigid method conflicts with the pursuit of spirit, and an excessive obsession with ink could lead to formalism and form a situation of homogeneity. Besides, "As an elegant interest and charm, a literati painting is integrity of calligraphy and drawing. A real excellent literati painter needs a wide knowledge of varieties of fields" (Chen & Xu, 2004) Merely seeking drawing techniques from calligraphy skills is likely to make another mistake. Painters like Wu Changshuo and Huang Binhong mentioned above, all have profound artistic cultivation. If a painting rookie is merely interested in techniques, the style, the appearance of painting, but neglects the cultivation in other fields, it's easy for him to be stuck in the trap of conformism. Yu Jianhua said, "Mr. Wu (Wu Changshuo), expert of both painting and calligraphy, was especially good at drawing

with calligraphy techniques. His drawings may seem like a mess, but he conveyed a feeling of powerfulness and his achievements were far profounder than the imitators who merely studied the appearance but not essence” (Ruan & Hu, 1991).

Recognized the problem, vigorous painters opened violent debates around Chinese painting one after another—the Chinese painting reformation movement thrived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the process of breaking off bad habits of painting circles, the excessive transformation of some painters led Chinese painting to another extreme. While the techniques of western painting such like sketch, shading, perspective and color were merged into Chinese painting, the new transformed Chinese art was distancing itself from calligraphy. In the process of Chinese painting modernization and westernization, the spiritual foundation of the relationship between painting and calligraphy was shook, as a result, It was not necessary for painters to learn calligraphy any more, finally, the way to studying and understanding calligraphy was blocked.

In order to have a good understanding of the relationship between painting and calligraphy, it's necessary to acknowledge the mutual influence between those two arts, and to admit their independent role as different artistic categories. The painter Chen Zhifo has his own interpretation of the relationship between artistic otology and brush and ink, he proposed “the essence of painting lied in similarity in form, but if a painter can't handle brush and ink well but only to seek for similarity, that is no painting at all. Dong Po wrote in his poem, ‘it is only children that excessively seeking for similarity in a painting’. It's a big mistake for the poor paintings to cover their defects with the excuse of seeking for similarity in form. Seeking not for similarity in form is seeking for similarity in spirit. If you just paint something casually, it's not painting at all” (Li & Chen, 1990). To be frank, Zhang had a clear understanding of this point, he said, “as a professional painter, one can't study literati painting only, he also need to learn painter's painting to lay a solid foundation in varieties of aspects. Only equipped with calligraphy skills can he master the brush and ink, and that is the unique feature of Chinese painting. Zhang knows that calligraphy is important to painting, but not decisive; it is a necessary requirement for a qualified painter, but not the only one. If a painter spends all his energy on brush and ink, but neglects the expression of his feeling and emotion, it's no painting at all. Briefly, the meaning of brush and ink to painters is not completely equal to those to calligraphers. “It's better to use center front for calligraphers, but for painters, it depends. The quality of an art is depended on its artistic effect. While they differ in many ways, they are neither superior nor inferior to each other” (Wu, 1987).

In my view, the relationship between calligraphy and painting can be divided into two levels; one is technical level, namely, the mutual influence and study of

techniques; another is spiritual level, namely, the ultimate pursuit of “vivid in flavor and tone” or “the rhythm of life”—painting or calligraphy techniques are designed for grasping the essence of objects. Enjoying the same cultural origin and philosophical foundation with Chinese painting, Chinese calligraphy pursuits “flavor and tone”. Some painters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Wu Changshuo, Qi Baishi, Zhang Daqian and Wu Hufan, all had such a understanding of calligraphy which consisted in these two aspects, except for their slightly difference in practice. From a perspective of difference, they are two things; from a perspective a similarity, they are one. Improving painting by learning from calligraphy or improving calligraphy by learning from painting, they are nothing else but techniques. What really important is the way to use them, those who use them correctly make miracles, those who use incorrectly make disasters.

Zhang Daqian's unique calligraphy character absorbed both tablet style and Tie style and his “Daqian Ti” style benefiting from copying thousands of calligraphy models were two important conditions for the success of his practice. Different from other artists who were skilled in both painting and calligraphy, Zhang's successful creation of splash-ink painting in his old age completely overthrew his previous understanding of painting and calligraphy relationships, it in return proofed his innovative spirit—root in tradition but never be stuck in tradition—and in return reflected his keen perception of this relationship. This is what makes Zhang so distinctive and charming.

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## CONCLUSION

With the increasing reinforcement of China's national power and cultural self-confidence and awareness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I believe Chinese painting and calligraphy status abroad will increasingly rise. Oriental art is becoming an important part in the global art world, and plays a bigger and bigger role. In such a process, it perhaps is a crucial issue for contemporary artists to go deeper into the tradition of calligraphy. Fortunately, among the young generation of artists, many have realized the significance of calligraphy to painting, and are giving emphasis on learning and researching calligraphy. We are fully convinced that the thought of abandoning calligraphy to improving painting will eventually eliminated by history, that the cultural awareness of learning from calligraphy and improving both by learning from each other is becoming a fashion and will be adopted by much more painters.

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