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INTEGRATING WESTERN FORMALISM THEORY  
AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY  
ARTWORK FOR CONTEMPORARY CHINESE  
CALLIGRAPHY AESTHETIC EVALUATION



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## ABSTRACT

This study proposes a contemporary aesthetic evaluation framework for Chinese calligraphy by combining traditional Chinese artistic principles with Western formalist theories. A comparative analysis approach is used, referencing the theoretical models of Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky to examine selected traditional Chinese calligraphic styles. The analysis reveals that Wölfflin's stylistic contrast principles and Panofsky's iconological method can be effectively applied to the structural and expressive elements of Chinese calligraphy. The findings further show that these Western theoretical frameworks can uncover the visual distinctiveness and conceptual foundations embedded in traditional Chinese calligraphic practices. By bridging cultural and theoretical boundaries, this study offers a fresh perspective for critically evaluating Chinese calligraphy within global art history. The resulting framework not only strengthens scholarly understanding of calligraphic aesthetics but also provides a practical method for identifying and describing stylistic features and aesthetic values across various calligraphic traditions. This study also contributes to ongoing discussions on cross-cultural aesthetics and has potential for future research. Furthermore, it opens new opportunities for exploration in cross-cultural art criticism methods and lays a foundation for developing new perspectives in Chinese calligraphy research.





## INTEGRASI TEORI FORMALISME BARAT DAN KARYA SENI KALIGRAFI TRADISIONAL CINA UNTUK PENILAIAN ESTETIKA KALIGRAFI CINA KONTEMPORARI

### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mencadangkan satu kerangka penilaian estetik kontemporari bagi kaligrafi Cina dengan menggabungkan prinsip artistik tradisional Cina bersama teori formalis Barat. Pendekatan analisis perbandingan digunakan dalam kajian ini dengan merujuk kepada model teori Heinrich Wölfflin dan Erwin Panofsky dalam meneliti gaya kaligrafi tradisional Cina yang dipilih. Analisis menunjukkan bahawa prinsip gaya kontras oleh Wölfflin dan kaedah ikonologi Panofsky dapat digunakan secara berkesan terhadap elemen struktur dan ekspresif kaligrafi Cina. Dapatan kajian seterusnya membuktikan bahawa kerangka teori Barat ini mampu memaparkan keunikan visual dan asas konseptual yang terkandung dalam amalan kaligrafi tradisional Cina. Melalui rentas batas budaya dan teori, kajian ini menawarkan perspektif baharu untuk menilai kaligrafi Cina secara kritis dalam konteks sejarah seni global. Kerangka yang dihasilkan bukan sahaja memperkukuh pemahaman ilmiah terhadap estetika kaligrafi, malah menyediakan satu kaedah praktikal untuk mengenal pasti serta menghuraikan ciri gaya dan nilai estetik dalam pelbagai tradisi kaligrafi. Kajian ini turut menyumbang kepada wacana berterusan mengenai estetika rentas budaya dan seterusnya mempunyai potensi untuk diterapkan dalam kajian-kajian akan datang. Seterusnya membuka peluang penerokaan lanjut dalam metodologi kritikan seni rentas budaya selain menyediakan asas untuk pembangunan perspektif baharu dalam penyelidikan kaligrafi Cina.





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## APPENDIX LIST

### A Field of Study Method- 9 artworks (Visual Analysis)





## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Overview



Traditional Chinese calligraphy embodies a profound cultural and artistic heritage, manifested through distinct styles such as Seal Script 篆书, Clerical Script 隶书, Regular Script 楷书, Running Script 行书, Cursive Script 草书 (Wang, 2010). These styles serve as unique expressions of aesthetic beauty and reflect the historical evolution and cultural richness of Chinese calligraphy.

Each calligraphic style carries its characteristics, presenting a harmonious blend of form, rhythm, and cultural symbolism. Seal Script, for instance, is renowned for its intricate and compact characters, often associated with official seals and ancient inscriptions (Li, 2015). Clerical Script, with its standardized and squared-off appearance, developed as a practical script for official documents (Chen, 2008).





Regular Script, characterized by its simplicity and legibility, has become the standard script for modern Chinese writing (Liu, 2003). Running Script and Cursive Script, on the other hand, break away from the rigid strokes of the previous styles, emphasizing fluidity and spontaneity in brushwork (Xu, 2012).

According to different styles in traditional calligraphy, the endeavor to develop a visual comparative framework that unravels the aesthetic intricacies of these calligraphy styles is a critical pursuit. As Thomas A. Green asserts, “Understanding the essence of calligraphy requires a nuanced approach that transcends mere visual analysis, delving into the historical and cultural depths that shaped each brushstroke” (Green, 2012, p. 45). This statement encapsulates the pivotal challenge at hand: How can a novel comparative method be crafted to capture the nuanced aesthetic qualities inherent in each of the five styles of Chinese calligraphy?

Therefore, this research’s main purpose is to develop a new aesthetic framework based on the combination of based on traditional Chinese calligraphy subjects with Western aesthetic theories of visual art.

In details about the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy, (Shi, 2017), Today, to discuss Chinese calligraphy theoretically, one inevitably must employ Western aesthetic concepts. Though Chinese academia, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, had produced more than a dozen books on aesthetics, none of them seriously considered the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy.<sup>16</sup> It was not until 1931 when the young historian Zhang Yinli (1905-1942) wrote “A Preface to Chinese Calligraphy





Criticism 中國書藝批評學序言”, the first treatise that critically examined Chinese calligraphy from a perspective of cross-cultural aesthetics.

In his “Preface”, Zhang focused on three key issues – aesthetic experience, classification of art, and the formal elements of Chinese calligraphy, quoting directly from some contemporary English books on aesthetics, such as DeWitt H. Parker’s *The Principle of Aesthetics* and Bernard Bosanquet’s *Three Lectures on Aesthetics*.

The fact is, since the late 1980s, some Chinese aestheticians have started to critically reflect on contemporary endeavors to analyze calligraphy from a perspective of cross-cultural aesthetics. A widely held view is that these new aesthetic discourses on calligraphy diverged from traditional Chinese artistic practice and criticism (Jin, 1994). As the contemporary philosopher Li Zhou put it:

Some foreign scholars and critics have employed a Western theoretical framework to analyze Chinese theories of literature and art. James J. Y. Liu, for example, set out six types of Chinese literary theory, other scholar of Xiong Bingming suggests that “if we take into account all the theories of calligraphy that have arisen since ancient times, they may be classed into six great systems,” namely, the schools of “realism,” “pure formalism,” “sentimentalism,” “ethicism,” “naturalism,” and “Chan sense.” Both categorizations are worthy of study, but both fall short of accuracy and in fact, seem a bit forced. They fail, in the end, to articulate the true spirit of Chinese art. To truly understand and explain in present-day theoretical terminology the highly intuitive and inclusive





Chinese aesthetics and its categories will be a long and involved process (Shi, 2017, p. 16).

Due to the widespread attention garnered by works in Chinese literature and painting, this is reflected in many academic publications. In contrast, there has been scant research in English on the theory of Chinese calligraphy (Shi, 2017). Despite the publication of the seminal work “Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic and Technical Introduction” by the renowned artist and writer Chiang Kai-shek in 1938, which stands as the first detailed English monograph on the subject, with a particular emphasis on calligraphic techniques such as brush usage and the composition of Chinese characters. In Chiang’s book, only one chapter briefly discusses the aesthetic principles behind calligraphy creation. Because much research builds upon calligraphy theory, there is a lack of systematic visual models for the comparative analysis of artistic styles in Chinese calligraphy.

According to Peng et al. (2017), a system utilizing quantitative methods has been developed for the computerized identification of calligraphic styles. Despite the significant progress made in the last decade in the digitalization and storage of Chinese historical calligraphic works, along with considerable advancements in computer-assisted research in the field of calligraphy, incorporating innovative approaches to address calligraphic issues such as calligraphy processing and analysis (Zhuang et al., 2005), calligraphic character retrieval (Peng et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2018), recognition (Lin et al., 2013; Peng et al., 2014), visualization (Wu et al., 2006), and specific style rendering (Zhang et al., 2010), this paper, while approaching calligraphy style identification from a computer perspective, still lacks an aesthetic standpoint.





Therefore, this research aims to address this gap by establishing a comparative aesthetic framework based on the study of five styles of Chinese calligraphy. The goal is to develop a model that can be utilized by other researchers. From this framework, one can identify the distinctive features of each style and define its aesthetic values in practical terms. The intention is to explore the possibility of integrating these styles to create a new analysis of the aesthetic framework for contemporary artworks.

### 1.1.1 The Current Status of Traditional Calligraphy in China

On September 13, 2006, the “General Office of the CPC Central Committee” and “The General Office of the State” Council issued the Outline of the National Cultural Development Plan for the Eleventh Five-Year Plan Period, emphasizing preserving excellent traditional Chinese cultural education, classics, and skills. In qualifying elementary schools, calligraphy, painting, and traditional craft classes are available. Including calligraphy instruction in the national cultural development plan demonstrates the state’s high regard for the legacy of Chinese calligraphy culture.

2019 saw the publication of “Response of the Ministry of Education to Suggestion No. 7496 of the First Session of the Thirteenth National People’s Congress” on the official website of the Ministry of Education. Concerning “incorporating calligraphy into the evaluation system of the college entrance examination,” the Ministry of Education stated that calligraphy should be incorporated into the evaluation system of the college entrance examination. It is directly responsible for promoting calligraphy education in elementary and middle schools.



In contemporary Chinese society, the promulgation of these regulations signifies an increasing recognition and emphasis on calligraphy by the state. With the development of the present era and the advancements in technology, the current status of traditional calligraphy can be categorized as follows:

a. Rise of Digital Calligraphy and New Media:

With technological progress, digital calligraphy and its dissemination on the Internet are gradually gaining prominence. Individuals can engage in calligraphic creation, share their works, and participate in learning exchanges through electronic devices and software. This trend presents new opportunities and challenges, sparking discussions on the relationship, authenticity, and innovation between traditional calligraphy and digital media. According to Wang (2023), the benefits of the rise of digitization and multimedia can be explained as follows:

On media platforms, calligraphers participate in diverse activities. For example, they organize sessions to share calligraphy knowledge, providing the public with the opportunity to explore traditional calligraphy at their convenience and enhance their understanding. Moreover, calligraphers conduct live broadcasts of online calligraphy courses, eliminating the constraints of time and space. Learners are no longer bound to physical classrooms, as they can access courses online, join discussions, and utilize course recordings at their convenience. Additionally, the creation of calligraphy forums brings together enthusiasts of this art form. Through announcements, artwork browsing, and online interactions, enthusiasts can connect and engage on this platform.



b. Education and Promotion of Traditional Calligraphy:

Many schools, art institutions, and cultural organizations continue to prioritize the education and promotion of calligraphy. Through the offering of calligraphy courses, organizing exhibitions, competitions, and lectures, as well as leveraging media and social platforms for the promotion of traditional calligraphy, it has gained broader recognition and dissemination.

c. International Exchange and Cross-Cultural Influence:

Traditional calligraphy has transcended national borders and engaged in extensive international exchange and influence. For instance, Chinese calligraphy art has attracted numerous overseas learners and enthusiasts, simultaneously impacting the development of calligraphy art in other countries. This cross-cultural exchange provides new perspectives and possibilities for the inheritance and development of calligraphy (Peng, 2021).

d. Appreciation of Traditional Calligraphy Art:

As an art form, traditional calligraphy continues to be appreciated and loved by many. Numerous individuals consider calligraphy works as art collectibles or use them as decorative items to enhance cultural ambiance and aesthetic appeal.

e. Calligraphy Competitions and Exhibitions:

Traditional calligraphy competitions and exhibitions remain popular in contemporary society. These events provide opportunities for calligraphy enthusiasts to showcase their skills, engage in learning exchanges, and contribute to the development and inheritance of calligraphy art (Gao, 2023).





From the above, it can be observed that traditional calligraphy faces several challenges in contemporary society. Specifically, the diminishing interest of the younger generation in traditional culture, coupled with the fast-paced lifestyle facilitated by electronic media, makes it difficult for individuals to concentrate. The intricate nature of calligraphy fonts and the multitude of calligraphic styles discourage many young people. Simultaneously, the competition from social media and other art forms further complicates traditional calligraphy's inheritance and development.

### 1.1.2 The Importance of Calligraphy

In recent years, calligraphy research in our country has demonstrated a flourishing development trend, garnering increasing attention and recognition in the field of art studies (Qiu, 2022).

In September 2009, Chinese calligraphy was inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Staff reporter, 2010). In March 2011, the “Directory of Disciplines for Degree Conferment and Talent Cultivation (2011)” elevated art studies to a discipline category, with fine arts being promoted to a first-level discipline, and calligraphy, as a sub-discipline under fine arts, also received a corresponding elevation in status (Directory of Disciplines for Degree Conferment and Talent Cultivation, 2011). In January 2013, the “Outline of Guidance for Calligraphy Education in Primary and Secondary Schools” incorporated calligraphy education into





the primary and secondary school teaching systems (Outline of Guidance for Calligraphy Education in Primary and Secondary Schools, 2021).

The calligraphy education system in higher education institutions has evolved into a multi-level structure encompassing specialized programs, undergraduate, master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral levels, contributing to the substantial growth of the research community in calligraphy studies (Lu, 2018). The increasing emphasis placed by relevant national authorities and the public on calligraphy as a traditional cultural art form further reflects the heightened significance accorded to this cultural heritage (Qiu, 2022).

From the above, it is evident that the issuance of government regulations from 2009 to 2013 indicates a high level of attention given to the field of calligraphy over a decade ago. Moreover, the comprehensive development and enhancement of the higher education calligraphy training system in recent years suggest an increasing prominence of calligraphy as a major discipline. This development signals a continuous improvement in the calligraphy system and a deepening of research in the field.

This observation underscores the significant role calligraphy plays not only in modern society but also in ancient times.

According to Cai (2010), it can be concluded that calligraphy had crucial practical functions in ancient China and was an indispensable means of daily communication. Therefore, due to his research, the concrete manifestations of ancient calligraphy can be categorized into the following four aspects:



a. Dissemination of Information and Social Functionality (Cai, 2010)

In ancient times, calligraphy played a pivotal role in recording, disseminating, and preserving crucial cultural, historical, and religious content. In social and ceremonial contexts, calligraphy works were frequently employed for composing greeting cards, presenting gifts, and drafting various official documents and ritual texts. This highlights the substantial practical functionality of ancient calligraphy, serving not only to fulfill the roles of recording, disseminating, and preserving cultural, historical, and religious content but also finding applications in daily interpersonal interactions, such as composing greeting cards and gift inscriptions.

b. Emotional Catharsis

In the second aspect, ancient calligraphers skillfully employed various elements such as font styles, structures, and themes to express their innermost emotions through ink on rice paper, creating unique and profound artistic expressions of emotions.

c. Cultural Heritage

The third aspect involves the crucial role of ancient calligraphy in cultural inheritance. The issuance of government regulations and the inclusion of calligraphy in educational curricula indicate a concerted effort to uphold and transmit this traditional art form across generations.

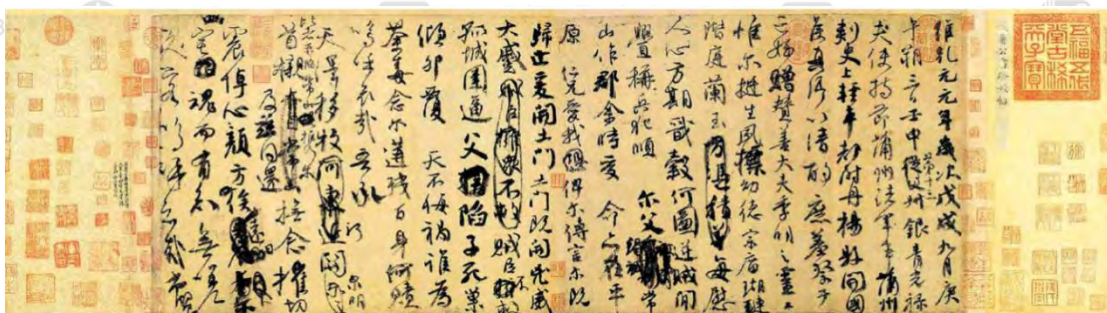
#### d. Aesthetic Function

Finally, ancient calligraphy served an aesthetic purpose. The intricate strokes and artistic expressions employed by calligraphers contributed to the visual and aesthetic appreciation of their works, showcasing the beauty inherent in this form of artistic expression.

In this regard, this aspect is evident in many artistic works, with notable examples including “Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew 祭侄文稿” and “丧乱贴”.

**Figure 1. 1**

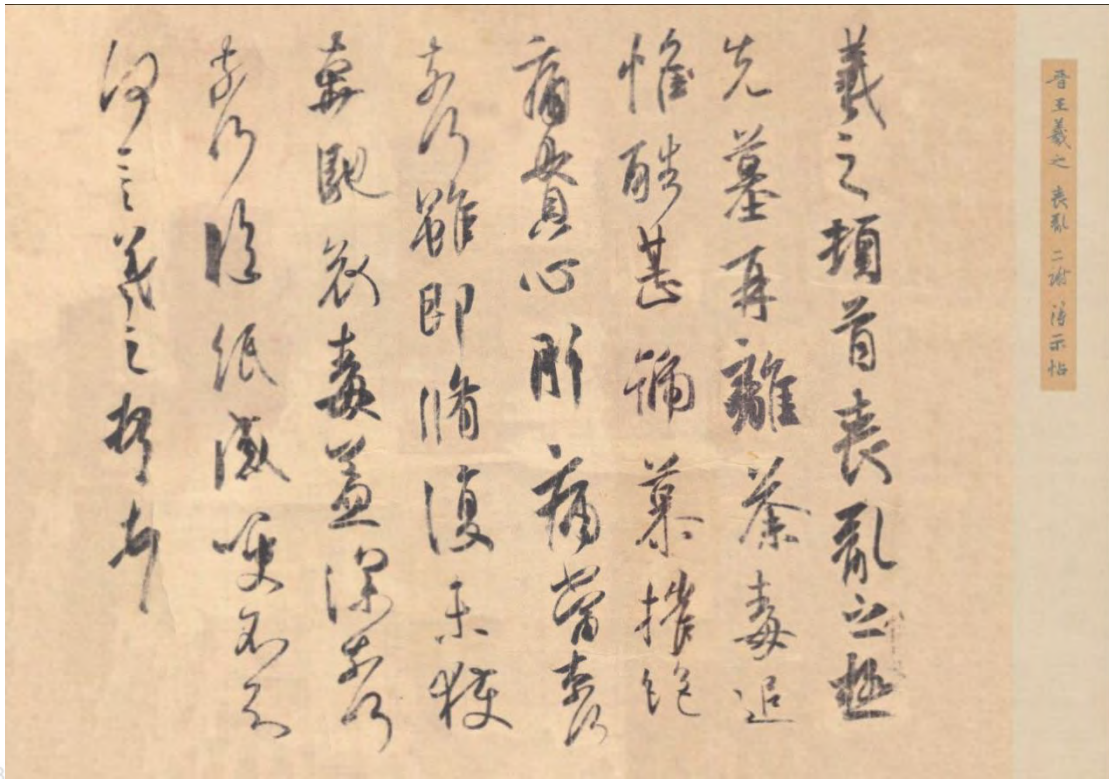
*Yan Zhenqing, Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew 祭侄文稿 59.6×29.2 cm.*



Source: Linghu, Y. (2022). *New Beauty* (02), p.38.

**Figure 1.2**

Wang Xizhi 丧乱贴” (Sàng Luàn Tiē), 28.7x30cm.



Source: <https://zitie.shufazidian.com/img/storm/f61d6947467ccd3aa5af24db320235dd>

In the third aspect, calligraphy artworks served as a crucial medium for ancient people to record texts, classics, documents, and historical events. Through writing and transcription, calligraphy preserved this vital information, passing it down through generations and retaining a rich cultural heritage (Ling, 2022).

According to (Fu et al., 2023), this emphasis lies on the practical functionality of calligraphy. Writing official documents, various types of official announcements, and the recording of texts and cultural heritage required the use of calligraphy. Therefore, it is through calligraphy that cultural traditions have been preserved and



passed down through the ages. This highlights that calligraphy not only serves as a tool for cultural inheritance but also plays a significant role in daily communication among people.

In the final aspect, calligraphy functions as a form of artistic expression and aesthetic enjoyment. Ancient calligraphy is widely regarded as an art form, emphasizing the beauty of form, artistic conception, and the expression of ink fragrance and artistic intent. Calligraphy art, with its unique lines, structures, and ink shades, creates distinctive artistic effects through the use of font styles and layout designs. By appreciating ancient calligraphy works, individuals can experience the beauty of art, enjoy aesthetic pleasures, and derive a sense of fulfillment for the soul. Many renowned calligraphy works, such as “Lanting Xu 兰亭序,” “Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew 祭侄文稿,” “The Cold Food Observance 黄州寒食帖,” and “MaGu Xiantan Ji 麻姑仙坛记,” have been handed down and are still imitated by modern calligraphers. This underscores the high aesthetic value of these inherited calligraphy artworks, prompting contemporary calligraphers to study and emulate them (Wang, 2023).



**Figure 1.3**

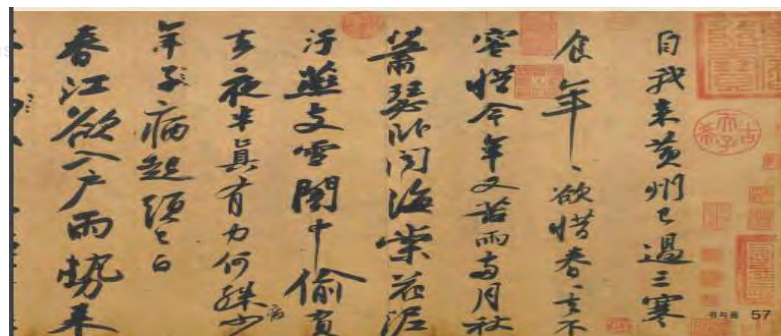
*Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion* 兰亭集序



Source: Chen, T. (2011). *Chinese Calligraphy*. (n.d.). Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

**Figure 1.4**

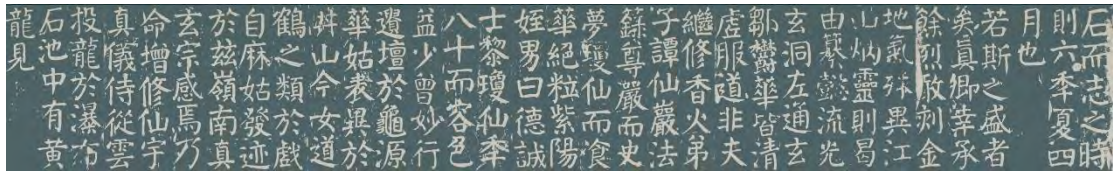
*Su Shi, The Cold Food Observance* 黄州寒食帖 Huangzhou Hanshi tie, 34.2×199.5 cm.



Source: Wang, B. (2023).

**Figure 1.5**

Yan Zhenqing, Magu Xiantan Ji.

Source: <https://zitie.shufazidian.com/img/group/6fc224198ce272498ec5b539f40793ca>

## 1.2 Background of Study

In this research, the exploration of the topic of calligraphy begins with an examination of its research background. The styles of traditional calligraphy are intricately connected to the historical evolution of calligraphy. Therefore, the investigation into calligraphy styles will adhere to the following principles, but it is worth noting that more details about the five calligraphy styles are in Chapter 2 of this research.

According to history, calligraphy includes 5 Script types (Qian & Fang, 2007).

- a. *Chuan-shu* (wen, 篆书) or *Chou-wen*, Seal Script (Large Seal Script & Small Seal Script)

In summary, the Chuan-shu script, also known as a bronze inscription 金文 or bell-and-tripod inscription 钟鼎文, is an important script type in Chinese calligraphy. It can be divided into three main styles: Pictorial Inscription, Great-seal Script, and Small-seal Script. The stamping-seal style, which is often associated with the Seal-script type, actually became significant much later, during the Ch'in and Han

periods. The terms “chuan” and “chou” in Chinese refer to the action of drawing or incising, and the English term “seal” can create confusion regarding the dates of script development.

b. *Ta-chuan (Great-seal Script/Large Seal Script)* 大篆

*The Ta-chuan*, or Large Seal Script, was a significant development in the history of Chinese calligraphy. It was primarily used on ritual bronzes and was in use from the eleventh to the seventh century B.C. This script was derived from both the Pictorial and Oracle Bone Inscriptions and became increasingly narrative and documentary in nature. As the amount and length of characters grew, the script became more abstract and regulated in terms of size, columns, and space. This period marked the realization that writing was not only for communication with the divine but could also be used for people’s communication purposes.

c. *Hsiao-chuan (Small Seal Script)* 小篆

The Small-seal Script pre-dates the Qin dynasty. It was developed during the Warring States period (475-221 BC) and was widely used in the Qin dynasty as the official script. It was a standardized form of the earlier Seal Script, with more consistent shapes and stroke orders, making it easier to read and write. It is characterized by a more flowing and elegant style, with curved lines and a greater emphasis on balance and harmony. Its name comes from the small seals used to imprint the characters onto documents and objects. The Small-seal Script was later replaced by the Clerical Script as the official script in the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD).



d. *Li-shu, Clerical-script* 隶书

Li-shu, also known as Clerical Script, is a script that emerged during the Qin and Han periods (221 B.C. to A.D. 221) as state functions became more important and the need for a more efficient and legible writing system arose. This script was simplified from the earlier Chuan-wen script and became the standard for official documents. The Clerical Script is characterized by its angular and straight strokes, with a standardized size and shape for each character. It reached its height of popularity in the Later Han period of the second century A.D. With the improvement of writing tools and the emergence of aesthetic awareness, calligraphers began to develop individual modes of expression, and calligraphy evolved as an art form that emphasized the quality of brushwork produced in ink on rice paper.



e. *K'ai-shu, Regular-script* 楷书

K'ai-shu, also known as Regular Script, is the most widely used script in modern Chinese and is taught to school children as the standard writing style. It is a simplified and more standardized version of the previous scripts, with fewer strokes and a more consistent form. K'ai-shu emerged in the Han Dynasty and became the official script during the Tang Dynasty, and it has remained the standard writing style in China ever since.

f. *Hsing-shu, Action-script/Running Script* 行书

Hsing-shu is a script that combines elements of the Draft and Regular Scripts. It is easier to read than the Draft script, making it popular in administrative circles and among artists. The characters in this script are partially connected, giving it a





flowing, cursive appearance. This script is also known as the “running” script, with “hsing” meaning “moving” or “walking” in Chinese. The brush movements in this script are slower than in the Draft script.

g. *Ts’ao-shu, Draft-script/Cursive Script* 草书

Actually, K’uang-ts’ao, or Wild-cursive Script, is not a form of Ts’ao-shu, but a style that evolved from the Cursive Script. It is characterized by its rapid and free-flowing strokes, with characters often connected in a continuous line. It emerged during the Han dynasty and was further developed in the Tang and Song dynasties. Although difficult to read, it is highly valued as a form of calligraphic art.

Therefore, Chinese calligraphy has undergone numerous transformations throughout its long history, resulting in the emergence of five principal styles of scripts, namely Seal, Clerical, Regular, Running, and Cursive, as well as lesser scripts.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

With the advent of the digital era, the study and development of traditional calligraphy have become increasingly urgent (Zhao, 2018). For authorities in the field of art, “tradition” often carries a positive connotation, especially in its connection with creativity and originality. In the realm of visual arts, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin asserted, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its integration with traditional culture” (Greenberg, 1982, p. 10). The emphasis on historical roots is a





distinctive feature of Chinese and East Asian art (Bullen & Richard, 2010, pp. 243–254).

In contemporary China, some scholars and artists actively attempt to integrate traditional Chinese calligraphy with Western aesthetic frameworks, aiming to seek a more comprehensive and modernized evaluation method that aligns traditional Chinese calligraphy with contemporary aesthetics and international trends (Li, 2020; Zhang, 2018). However, despite the unique innovative potential demonstrated by such cross-cultural artistic explorations, these efforts remain in their infancy and lack a unified and widely accepted integrative framework. Furthermore, many studies (e.g., Shi, 2017; Wu et al., 2020's "Embodied Art: The Aesthetics of Chinese Calligraphy"; and Calligan's "A Generator of Chinese Calligraphic Characters Perceiving Style and Structure")—although based on these five calligraphic styles—have yet to explore the comparison between formalism and these five calligraphy styles, thereby raising a series of critical issues worthy of deeper investigation.

First, the deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional calligraphy through digital technology have become a focus of interdisciplinary research in recent years. Li et al. (2009), in their study "Designing a Novel System to Classify Traditional Chinese Calligraphy Images," developed a calligraphy image classification system that extracted texture features such as "second-order moment" and "contrast" via the Gray-Level Co-occurrence Matrix (GLCM), achieving algorithmic recognition of seal script, clerical script, and regular script. However, the study clearly pointed out that when the algorithm transformed Wang Xizhi's "running spirit" in the "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion" into a "spatial distribution probability model," the underlying philosophical





concept was completely stripped away—confirming Chen’s (2023) core assertion in "Chinese Calligraphy: An Ancient Art in the Modern Era" that Western formalist quantitative analysis frameworks struggle to capture the non-visual aesthetic categories inherent in Chinese calligraphy.

In the practice of cross-cultural aesthetic integration, Heinrich Wölfflin’s formalist theory reveals significant cultural adaptability limitations. Von Orelli-Messerli (2020), in “A Noble Patronage: Heinrich Wölfflin on the Relation of Art History and Literature,” demonstrated through the formal isomorphism of Poussin’s paintings and Corneille’s literature the Western formalism’s mechanism for capturing the “spirit of the age,” yet this mechanism fails when confronted with Chinese calligraphy.



According to Mrugalski et al. (2022), in “Central and Eastern European Literature Theory and the West,” Panofsky’s “theory of estrangement,” while sharing some commonalities with the aesthetics of calligraphy, overlooks the unique transformational logic of Chinese character structure due to its Western-centric perspective.

This is because the differences between Western formalism and traditional Chinese calligraphic aesthetic thought lie in Western formalism’s emphasis on purely visual and structural elements, whereas traditional Chinese calligraphy places greater importance on cultural, philosophical, and symbolic depth. Consequently, this difference makes it difficult for Western aesthetic frameworks to effectively evaluate Chinese calligraphy.





Second, although Western formalism and Chinese calligraphy each emphasize different aspects in aesthetic evaluation, there is currently no comprehensive framework that synthesizes both perspectives. This presents limitations for scholars, curators, and critics when evaluating contemporary artworks that incorporate both Eastern and Western elements, particularly in the fields of Chinese calligraphy and modern visual art.

Finally, based on the above information, it is evident that with the increasing global influence of the integration of contemporary Eastern and Western art, there is a growing need among scholars in the field of traditional Chinese calligraphy for a more comprehensive Western evaluation framework. To address these issues, this study conducts a comparative analysis of five traditional Chinese calligraphy styles and proposes a new aesthetic evaluation framework. This framework is intended to analyze, understand, and compare the characteristics of the five calligraphy styles, revealing their formal structures and the deeper meanings they represent. Therefore, the framework proposed in this study can be used by other students or researchers and can serve as a reference tool for domestic and international scholars seeking to define the characteristics and aesthetic values of these five calligraphic styles. Additionally, it can provide calligraphy researchers and artists with a potential pathway to integrate all style features and create new aesthetics for contemporary art. Ultimately, this study aims to fill the gap in applying formalist analysis to traditional Chinese calligraphic styles.





## 1.4 Research Purpose

The study's purpose is to create an innovative and integrated framework for aesthetic evaluation that combines Western formalist principles with the artistic richness of traditional Chinese calligraphy. Thus, it will provide a more inclusive and comprehensive method for assessing contemporary traditional Chinese calligraphy art.

**To Bridge the Gap Between Western and Eastern Aesthetic Theories:** The study aims to bridge the gap between Western formalism and Chinese calligraphy by identifying commonalities and reconciling their differences. The purpose is to foster a cross-cultural understanding of visual aesthetics that incorporates both the structural, and formal aspects emphasized by Western art theory and the cultural, philosophical, and expressive elements central to Chinese calligraphy.

**To Develop an Integrated Framework for Aesthetic Evaluation:** The primary purpose of the study is to create a new, comprehensive framework that merges Western formalism theory with the traditional principles of Chinese calligraphy to evaluate contemporary visual artwork. This framework addresses the limitations of applying either perspective in isolation and provides a more holistic approach to understanding visual aesthetics in contemporary art.

**To Offer a Comprehensive Method for Evaluating Hybrid Art Forms:** With the increasing prevalence of hybrid art forms that combine Western and Eastern artistic influences, the study intends to provide a framework that can be applied to artworks that incorporate both traditions. This includes offering tools for analyzing and





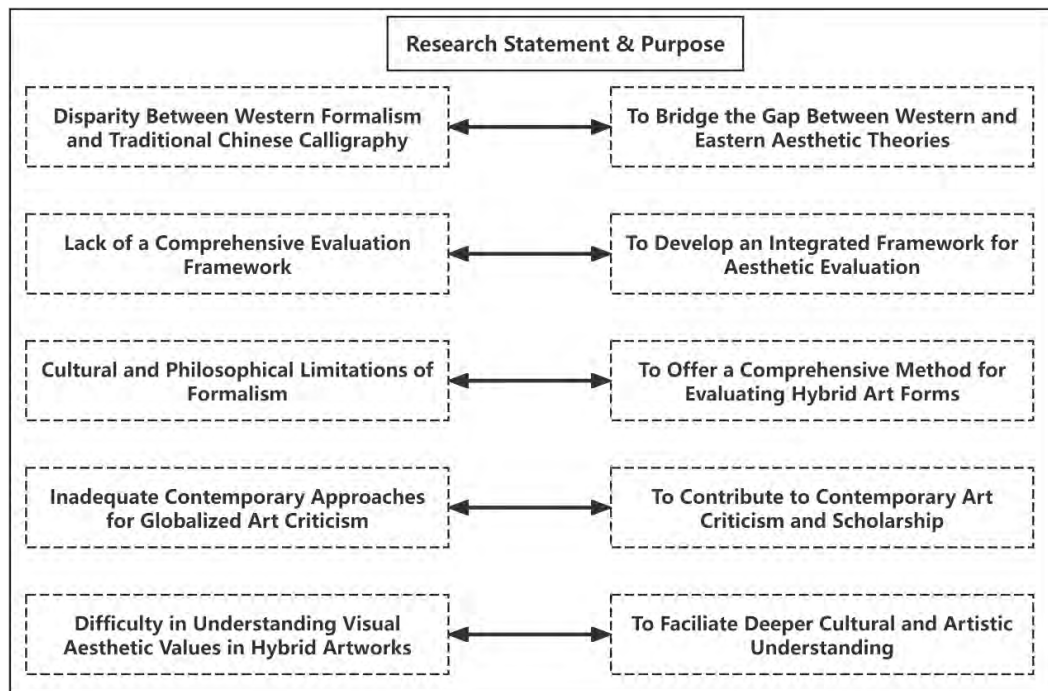
appreciating artworks that blend the technical precision of Western formalism with the symbolic and meditative qualities of Chinese calligraphy.

**To Contribute to Contemporary Art Criticism and Scholarship:** The study seeks to contribute to the broader field of contemporary art criticism by offering an innovative approach to aesthetic evaluation that is better suited to a globalized art world. It aims to enrich art scholarship by expanding the scope of how we assess visual artworks, particularly in the context of cultural exchange and the growing importance of interdisciplinary approaches to art criticism.

**To Facilitate Deeper Cultural and Artistic Understanding:** Another key purpose is to enhance understanding between Western and Eastern artistic traditions. By developing an integrated evaluation framework, the study seeks to foster a greater appreciation of Chinese calligraphy and its integration into contemporary art discourse, promoting cross-cultural dialogue and respect for diverse artistic practices.

Therefore, based on the above description of the research problem and purpose, the diagram of the conceptual framework will be following:



**Figure 1.6***Research Statement & Purpose***1.5 Research Objectives**

The study should aim to provide an in-depth exploration of Western and Chinese aesthetic theories, propose a practical evaluation framework, and contribute to the advancement of art criticism in the context of globalized, hybrid art forms.

RO 1:

To identify the aesthetic characteristics of contemporary Chinese calligraphy through the lens of Western formalism and traditional Chinese principles.



RO 2:

To analyze the relationship of Chinese calligraphy characteristics with Western aesthetic value by Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky's theories.

RO 3:

To develop an alternative framework combination of Western and traditional principles can be applied to assess contemporary Chinese calligraphy.

## 1.6 Research Questions

RQ 1:

What are the key aesthetic elements found in contemporary Chinese calligraphy when evaluated using Western formalism and traditional principles?

RQ 2:

How to analyze the relationship of Chinese calligraphy characteristics with Western aesthetic value by Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky's theories?

RQ 3:

How can a combined evaluative framework of Western and traditional principles be effectively applied to contemporary Chinese calligraphy?





## 1.7 Importance of the Research

The following statements elucidate the importance of the research:

- a. **Enrichment of Calligraphy Art Theory:** By conducting an in-depth comparison of five major calligraphic styles, this study contributes to the expansion of professional knowledge in calligraphy art. A profound understanding of the aesthetic, historical, and cultural characteristics of each style enriches the corpus of knowledge in calligraphy art.
- b. **Promotion of Innovation and Expression:** The research reveals the unique techniques, lines, and forms of the five different styles, providing calligraphy artists with additional and detailed creative inspiration and expressive avenues. This aids in fostering innovation in the artistic process, allowing artists to showcase personalized styles.
- c. **Stimulation of Artistic Exchange:** In-depth exploration of five distinct calligraphic styles promotes communication and collaboration among artists domestically and internationally. This facilitates dialogue in calligraphy art across different cultural backgrounds, creating a broader platform for collaboration among calligraphy artists worldwide.
- d. **Facilitation of Cultural Heritage:** The study offers historical insights into each distinct style of traditional Chinese calligraphy, assisting cultural inheritors in better preserving and promoting traditional Chinese culture. The research outcomes





provide a deeper cultural understanding for future generations of calligraphy artists, thereby advancing the inheritance and development of traditional calligraphy.

Overall, the significance of this research lies not only in deepening our understanding of calligraphy art but also in providing new insights for artists and cultural inheritors, propelling further development in the practical aspects of calligraphy art.

## 1.8 Scope of Research

Akanle (2020) defines the scope of research along four dimensions: geography, academic domain, target population (including demographic characteristics), and time. Specifically, the researcher must clarify who or what is being studied, the breadth of concepts used to address the research objectives, and the temporal boundaries within the particular context.

Similarly, Baron (2009) asserts that the scope of research includes the research questions posed, the specific details of the study objectives, the theoretical stance adopted by the researcher, and the population relevant to the study. Pajares (2007) adds that the scope should also specify which activities will not be undertaken—such as certain literature, population groups, or methodologies—and explain the reasoning behind these exclusions, as well as identify the factors that determine these boundaries.





Akanle (2020) further elaborates that the theoretical framework employed in a study influences—and indeed defines—the nature and limits of the research scope. If a particular theory has limitations in terms of scope, the researcher can employ triangulation or integrate additional perspectives to address the research objectives, thereby broadening the scope.

Based on the above, this section should address four elements:

- a. Geography, academic discipline, research population, demographic characteristics, and temporal dimension.
- b. Study subjects; the breadth of the concepts used in the research objectives; and the temporal span set within the specific context.
- c. The theoretical stance adopted and the population related to the research.
- d. Which activities the research will not undertake and the factors that determine those exclusions.
- e. Excluded activities and justifications: what will not be done and the factors determining those boundaries.

Therefore, according to the research topic, RO and RQ, the table of scope of research follows:



In this study, firstly, the geographical aspect cannot be determined because the calligraphic styles examined are historically contextualized. Thus, geography is neither definable nor a focus of this research.

In terms of academic discipline, this study belongs to the field of traditional Chinese calligraphy and Western Formalism theory.

Regarding demographics and sampling, demographic factors are irrelevant because the research adopts a comparative analysis approach. Therefore, the samples consist of 15 calligraphic artworks. Temporally, the study covers the Qin Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty (221 BCE–618 CE), as it is based on the stylistic evolution of calligraphy.

In the study subjects, the primary focus is on traditional Chinese calligraphy. As established in prior research, Chinese calligraphy is classified into five major styles: Seal Script, Clerical Script, Regular Script, Running Script, and Cursive Script.

The research objective is to analyze Western Formalism theory in relation to ancient Chinese calligraphy. The theoretical framework draws upon Heinrich Wölfflin's Formalism theory and Erwin Panofsky's Iconology. Wölfflin's theory emphasizes the formal aspects of artworks, while Panofsky's theory highlights their intrinsic meanings. Therefore, this study applies Panofsky's Iconology to complement Wölfflin's Formalism in analyzing the 15 traditional Chinese calligraphic artworks.



### 1.8.1 Limitation of Research

According to Simon (2011), research limitations are by no means negative aspects of a study as commonly misunderstood by students, researchers, and development partners. Limitations do not necessarily reduce the practicality and effectiveness of research. Limitations refer to factors that researchers cannot control but may affect research methods or outcomes. In some aspects, they may also be unexpected issues that researchers could have or should have covered but failed to address.

According to Prise and Mwnan (2004), limitations refer to restrictions on the universality, practical application and effectiveness of research results. These restrictions originate from the research design initially chosen by researchers/methods used to establish internal and external validity, referring to problems and challenges encountered by researchers during the research process that may affect research results and their interpretation.

Born (2009) believes that such limitations may be reflected in the theoretical or methodological choices of the research, or may stem from problems encountered during data collection. For example: researchers may use convenience sampling instead of systematic sampling due to some unavoidable objective reasons, or encounter difficulties during interviews. These difficulties are not the researchers' fault, but if not fully reported or properly addressed, may damage the credibility of the research.





Therefore, based on the above information, the limitations of this study are:

First, in terms of data collection, the researcher selected field study as the data collection method for RO1. Due to the renovation of the Forest of Stone Steles Museum in Shaanxi Province, China, only one exhibition hall was open. Therefore, this uncontrollable factor is the first limitation of this study. Since it was not caused by the researcher, in terms of sample selection, only the calligraphy works available in the first exhibition hall could be selected. The famous calligraphy works stored in other halls could not be accessed due to the renovation, resulting in insufficient sample size in the field study. To solve this problem, when collecting data for RO1, in addition to the 9 calligraphy works collected in the exhibition hall, the researcher selected visual analysis as a supplement to the RO data collection method to ensure high-definition images and data analyzability.



The second limitation is also a problem encountered during data collection. This study adopted purposive sampling in population selection. Although these 15 calligraphy works cover five calligraphy styles, because this study is a comparative analysis research and the research objects are artworks, due to the particularity of the research objects, the detailed theoretical framework analyzed is only applicable to these 15 calligraphy works and cannot be extended to other artworks beyond the sampled population.





## 1.8.2 Delimitation

### a. Setting

The researchers investigated only Chinese calligraphy and did not include other countries. The research was solely focused on Chinese calligraphy and did not include calligraphy from other countries or regions. By narrowing the scope to Chinese calligraphy, the researchers were able to delve deeper into the rich history, cultural context, and technical evolution of this art form. This decision allowed the study to be more detailed and specific to the Chinese tradition, examining the distinct features and nuances of its five primary calligraphy styles: Seal Script, Clerical Script, Regular Script, Running Script, and Cursive Script. However, this limitation also means that the study does not account for the influence or comparison of other calligraphic traditions from countries such as Japan, Korea, or the Middle East, each of which has its own distinctive calligraphic art forms. The exclusion of other traditions leaves room for further research that could explore the interrelations or cross-cultural influences in the evolution of calligraphy across different regions.

### b. Methodology

The study exclusively employs qualitative research methodology, which allows for an in-depth examination of the cultural, artistic, and historical aspects of the calligraphic styles. However, the decision to exclude quantitative methods and mixed-methods research limits the ability to gather statistical data or generalizable insights. For example, the study does not capture broader trends in the popularity or usage frequency of specific calligraphy styles. Future research incorporating





quantitative methods could provide data on the broader societal reception of these styles, which could complement the qualitative findings and offer a more well-rounded analysis.

c. Exclusion of Contemporary Calligraphy Innovations

While the study focuses on traditional Chinese calligraphy styles, it does not extensively address the modern innovations in Chinese calligraphy that blend traditional and contemporary influences. Contemporary calligraphy artists often incorporate digital tools, experimental techniques, and new media into their works, which may provide new interpretations of these ancient scripts. By excluding modern approaches, the study misses the opportunity to explore the intersection of tradition and innovation in Chinese calligraphy and how these styles are evolving in response to globalization and technological advancements. Future studies could expand the scope to include modern adaptations and how these innovations influence the perception and practice of traditional calligraphy styles.

d. Limited Cultural Representation

Although the study highlights the aesthetic and technical characteristics of five traditional calligraphy styles, it does not fully explore the regional and cultural diversity within China that may affect the practice and perception of these styles. Different regions of China have their own historical and cultural contexts, which may influence how calligraphy is taught, practiced, and appreciated. The study could have been enriched by including a wider range of regional perspectives and examining how local traditions and schools of calligraphy influence the formal characteristics of the scripts.

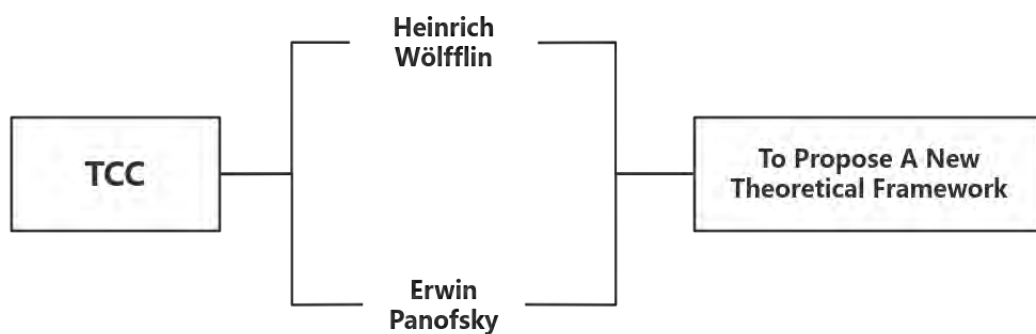


## 1.9 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework diagram follows:

**Figure 1.7**

*Theoretical Framework*



This research topic is TCC (traditional Chinese calligraphy), and the research aim is to integrate traditional Chinese calligraphy and Western formalist theory to seek a more comprehensive evaluation of a new aesthetic framework. The theoretical framework draws on Heinrich Wölfflin's formal analysis method and Erwin Panofsky's image research method. This study employs two distinct methods, drawing inspiration from Heinrich Wölfflin and Panofsky.

These methods are integrated to explore fifteen calligraphic artworks, which include three examples each of Seal Script, Clerical Script, Regular Script, Running Script, and Cursive Script. Wölfflin's approach focuses on the visual structure and stylistic characteristics of artworks, while Panofsky's method delves into the deeper meanings and historical contexts embedded within them. By combining these two



approaches, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the fifteen calligraphic works under examination.

### *Heinrich Wölfflin's formalism theory*

Heinrich Wölfflin's formal analysis method, as presented in his influential work *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1915), offers a systematic approach to understanding and comparing art across different periods. Wölfflin identified five key pairs of concepts that form the foundation of his method, allowing for a detailed analysis of the formal aspects of artworks.

One of the core pairs is linearity vs. tonality, which focuses on the distinction between artworks that emphasize clear, sharp outlines and those that use tonal effects such as shading, light, and shadow to create depth and volume. In the context of calligraphy, Seal Script often emphasizes linearity, with precise and defined strokes creating a clear structure. Regular Script, in contrast, may use tonal effects, where variations in pressure and ink gradation add volume and depth to the characters, offering a subtler approach to form. This distinction can help compare the differing techniques and visual impact of these two styles.

Another important distinction is plan vs. recession, which pertains to how space is used in an artwork. A flat, two-dimensional treatment of space is referred to as a plan, while recession suggests a sense of depth, often using perspective. In calligraphy, Clerical Script typically presents a more flattened structure, where the characters are arranged with little sense of depth, reflecting the planar aspect of the style. On the other hand, Running Script often conveys a sense of movement and openness, with characters





flowing outward and creating a dynamic spatial relationship that aligns with the concept of recession. This difference highlights the way space is conceptualized and employed in different scripts.

The concept of closed vs. open form explores whether the composition is self-contained or extends beyond its boundaries. Closed form refers to a tightly organized arrangement where the elements stay within the frame, while open form suggests a more fluid and expansive approach. In calligraphy, Regular Script typically exhibits a closed form, with carefully structured and organized characters that fit neatly within the designated space. In contrast, Cursive Script often displays an open form, where characters flow freely from one to the next, breaking traditional compositional constraints and allowing for more expressive movement. This openness reflects the script's dynamic and artistic nature, where the individual characters seem to extend beyond their defined limits.

Multiple vs. unified addresses whether the elements within an artwork appear fragmented or cohesive. Calligraphy styles like Running Script often have a more fragmented appearance, with characters that are not as tightly connected, creating a sense of multiple forms. However, Regular Script tends to be more unified, with the individual characters working together in a cohesive and structured manner. This distinction underscores the transition in Chinese calligraphy from more disjointed forms to a unified, organized approach, where each stroke contributes to the overall harmony of the composition.





Finally, clearness vs. unclearness pertains to the clarity or ambiguity of the visual elements in a work. In Regular Script, the calligraphy typically exhibits a high degree of clarity, with each character distinctly defined and executed with precision. In contrast, Cursive Script can display a sense of unclearness, where the characters become more fluid and abstract, making some elements harder to decipher. This variability between clarity and ambiguity is a hallmark of the different calligraphic styles, reflecting the varying degrees of abstraction and personal expression in each.

By applying Wölfflin's categories to the analysis of calligraphy, we gain insights into the visual elements that define each script and how they interact with the broader cultural and aesthetic contexts of their time. These categories offer a framework for understanding not just the technical execution of the brushstrokes but also the deeper visual and spatial dynamics at play in the evolution of Chinese calligraphy.



### *Panofsky's Iconological Method*

Panofsky's iconology is a three-level approach to art analysis, designed to deepen the understanding of an artwork by examining not only its visible elements but also its symbolic meanings and broader cultural and historical contexts. This method allows for a nuanced interpretation of visual culture, focusing on how art represents and communicates ideas beyond the immediate, observable features.

The first level, pre-iconography, is concerned with the literal description of the subject matter, identifying the visible elements within an artwork. This descriptive phase focuses on recording what is represented, such as people, objects, or scenes, without making any interpretations of their meanings. The primary goal is to gather





factual, objective data that can serve as the foundation for further analysis. At this stage, the viewer is not concerned with what the elements mean but simply what is depicted.

The second level, iconography, goes beyond a mere description to investigate the themes, symbols, and motifs present in the artwork. Here, the focus is on understanding the significance of the identified elements and interpreting their symbolic meanings. Panofsky emphasized that iconography seeks to decipher how certain objects, figures, or gestures represent abstract ideas, values, or concepts tied to a specific cultural or historical context. Iconography thus interprets the artwork considering known symbols, allegories, and established conventions. For example, in Western art, a lamb may symbolize Christ, while in Chinese art, the dragon can represent imperial power or good fortune.



The final level, iconology, involves the most profound layer of interpretation. This stage seeks to understand the underlying cultural, historical, and philosophical meanings embedded within the artwork. It is concerned with how the artwork reflects the social, political, intellectual, or religious climate of the time in which it was created. Iconology explores how an artwork fits into larger cultural narratives and how it relates to the broader context in which it was produced. By analyzing the historical, philosophical, and cultural forces that shaped the artwork, iconology provides insights into its deeper significance (Panofsky, 1939; Moxey, 1986).





### *Application to Calligraphy*

Panofsky's iconological method offers a robust framework for understanding the complexities of calligraphic works. As a medium that combines both visual form and cultural significance, calligraphy often carries layers of meaning beyond its aesthetic qualities. Applying Panofsky's method allows for a deeper exploration of the symbolic and cultural meanings embedded in written texts and offers a way to understand calligraphy not just as a visual art but as a cultural artifact that reflects the values and ideologies of its time.

In the pre-iconographic stage of analyzing calligraphy, the first step is to provide a literal description of the inscription. This includes identifying the characters, their arrangement, and any visible stylistic features such as the type of script (e.g., Seal Script, Clerical Script, Regular Script, etc.), the brushwork, the size of the characters, and the overall structure of the composition. At this stage, the primary focus is on cataloging these visible elements without interpreting their meanings. For example, when analyzing a piece written in Regular Script, one might observe the even spacing and carefully formed characters, which contrast with the freer, more flowing style of Running Script.

The iconographic stage builds upon the literal description by interpreting the meanings of the symbols and themes present in the calligraphy. In Chinese calligraphy, each character or phrase carries a symbolic significance. For example, inscriptions on memorial steles often convey respect for ancestors or commemorate historical figures. The selection of words or characters in the calligraphy may reflect the values or cultural ideals of the time, such as filial piety, loyalty, or social harmony. For instance, the





choice to use certain characters, such as "benevolence" or "righteousness," may reflect Confucian ideals, which were central to the culture of the Tang Dynasty. Additionally, the act of writing itself can be seen as a symbolic gesture of cultural identity, social status, or personal expression (Panofsky, 1939).

In the iconological stage, the analysis delves deeper into understanding the broader historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts in which the calligraphy was created. Here, the focus is on how the calligraphic work engages with the intellectual, social, and political currents of its time. For example, an inscription written during the Song Dynasty may be analyzed in terms of the intellectual climate of Neo-Confucianism, which emphasized moral self-cultivation and the importance of learning. The form of the calligraphy—whether rigid and formal like Regular Script or more fluid and expressive like Cursive Script—can also be analyzed in relation to the evolving attitudes toward personal expression and the role of the scholar-official class in society. In this way, calligraphy becomes not only a personal or artistic expression but also a reflection of larger cultural and philosophical shifts (Moxey, 1986).

Furthermore, the study of iconology in calligraphy can explore how the written form interacts with larger societal structures. For instance, an inscription on a public monument may reflect political ideologies or the emperor's authority. The calligraphy in this context can be seen as a tool for communicating political power, asserting social hierarchy, and reinforcing cultural norms. Analyzing the historical context of the script used—whether it is the official style for government records or the more personal script used in poetry—provides insight into the shifting functions and values of writing throughout Chinese history.





Through Panofsky's method, the study of calligraphy moves beyond a mere examination of brushstrokes and aesthetics to a deeper understanding of the social, political, and philosophical meanings encoded in the written word. The three levels of analysis—pre-iconography, iconography, and iconology—allow for a holistic interpretation of calligraphy as a cultural and intellectual product, revealing how it embodies the values, ideologies, and historical forces of its time.

### *Integration of Wölfflin's and Panofsky's Theories*

The integration of Heinrich Wölfflin's formal analysis and Erwin Panofsky's iconological method provides a rich, multi-layered framework for understanding calligraphic works. Each method operates on a different yet complementary level, allowing a nuanced exploration of both the visual and symbolic elements inherent in the art form. Wölfflin's formal analysis concentrates on the tangible, aesthetic features of the work—such as brushstrokes, spatial organization, and compositional harmony. This level of analysis is essential for discerning the artistic techniques, visual effects, and stylistic choices employed by the calligrapher. For instance, by applying Wölfflin's concepts like linearity vs. tonality, one can analyze whether the calligraphy emphasizes rigid, well-defined lines (as seen in Seal Script) or incorporates tonal effects (such as varying thicknesses of strokes) that add a sense of volume and depth to the characters (as seen in Regular Script).

However, Wölfflin's approach does not account for the deeper meanings and significance of these formal choices. This is where Panofsky's iconology comes into play. Panofsky's method encourages the researcher to step beyond the immediate aesthetic characteristics of calligraphy and explore its symbolic meanings, cultural





significance, and historical context. His three-tiered approach—pre-iconography, iconography, and iconology—offers a systematic way to interpret how certain characters or inscriptions convey moral, social, or political messages. While Wölfflin’s formal analysis describes the visual appearance of the strokes, Panofsky’s iconology interprets their cultural resonance, linking the work to the broader intellectual and social currents of its time.

The integration of these two methodologies allows for a holistic understanding of calligraphy. Wölfflin’s visual analysis provides the foundational understanding of how the calligraphy is constructed, while Panofsky’s iconology adds depth by unveiling the contextual meanings that lie beneath the surface. By combining these methods, scholars can explore the how and the why of the artwork—how it is visually structured and why it holds cultural or historical significance.



### *Synergy*

The synergy between Wölfflin’s formal analysis and Panofsky’s iconological method enables a more comprehensive exploration of both the form and the meaning behind calligraphic works. This dual approach provides a fuller understanding of calligraphy, not only as an art form but also as a cultural artifact that reflects the values, ideologies, and historical forces of its time. When analyzing a calligraphic work, the researcher can explore the technical intricacies, such as brushstroke technique and spatial arrangement, alongside a deeper examination of the cultural, historical, and symbolic meanings encoded in the text.





For instance, the study of Regular Script using Wölfflin's categories might focus on its symmetrical, orderly composition, its emphasis on clarity, and its precise use of brushstrokes. In contrast, Panofsky's method would guide the researcher to examine how the formal qualities of Regular Script reflect the cultural and intellectual climate of the Tang Dynasty, which prized orderliness, scholarly virtue, and the cultivation of moral values. The calligraphy is not only a formal achievement but also a representation of the ethical ideals of the time.

Similarly, when examining Running Script, Wölfflin's formal analysis could highlight its more fluid and dynamic form, where brushstrokes are less rigid and characters often merge into one another. The calligrapher's choice to use this style could be explored through Panofsky's iconology as a reflection of the evolving role of the scholar-official during the Song Dynasty. As the role of the individual scholar became more prominent, Running Script offered a means of self-expression, reflecting both the personal nature of scholarly work and the broader cultural shift toward individualism.

Moreover, the synergy between Wölfflin and Panofsky's methods allows for an examination of the evolving relationship between form and meaning in calligraphy over time. The shift from the formal, regulated strokes of Seal Script to the more expressive styles of Cursive Script can be understood not only through the formal lens of Wölfflin's analysis—by examining changes in brushstroke style and composition—but also through Panofsky's method by considering how these changes reflect shifts in cultural values, political systems, or intellectual movements. For example, the increased use of Cursive Script in personal poetry and letters during the Tang and Song dynasties





can be interpreted as a reaction against the rigidity of earlier scripts and an embrace of a more personal, intimate form of expression. The stylistic shift from order to freedom in this case can be seen as an artistic response to the growing emphasis on personal identity and emotional expression in Chinese intellectual life.

Furthermore, by combining the methods of Wölfflin and Panofsky, we gain a deeper understanding of how calligraphy functions as a cultural symbol in different historical periods. The study of an inscription from a political or religious text can reveal how the formal qualities of the calligraphy—such as the balance of unity and clarity in Regular Script—convey the authority, solemnity, and reverence associated with the message. Simultaneously, Panofsky's iconology would uncover the ideological and philosophical messages embedded in the text, showing how the style and form of the calligraphy serve not only as a visual language but also as a vehicle for ideological expression.

In this integrated approach, Wölfflin's and Panofsky's methods work together to reveal a fuller understanding of calligraphy's role as a cultural and intellectual practice. While Wölfflin provides the tools to analyze the formal characteristics of the artwork, Panofsky uncovers the deeper meanings that shape and are shaped by those formal choices. This approach enriches our understanding of calligraphy by revealing the complex interplay between aesthetics, symbolism, and cultural context, providing insights into both the technical mastery of the calligrapher and the cultural forces that inform the work.

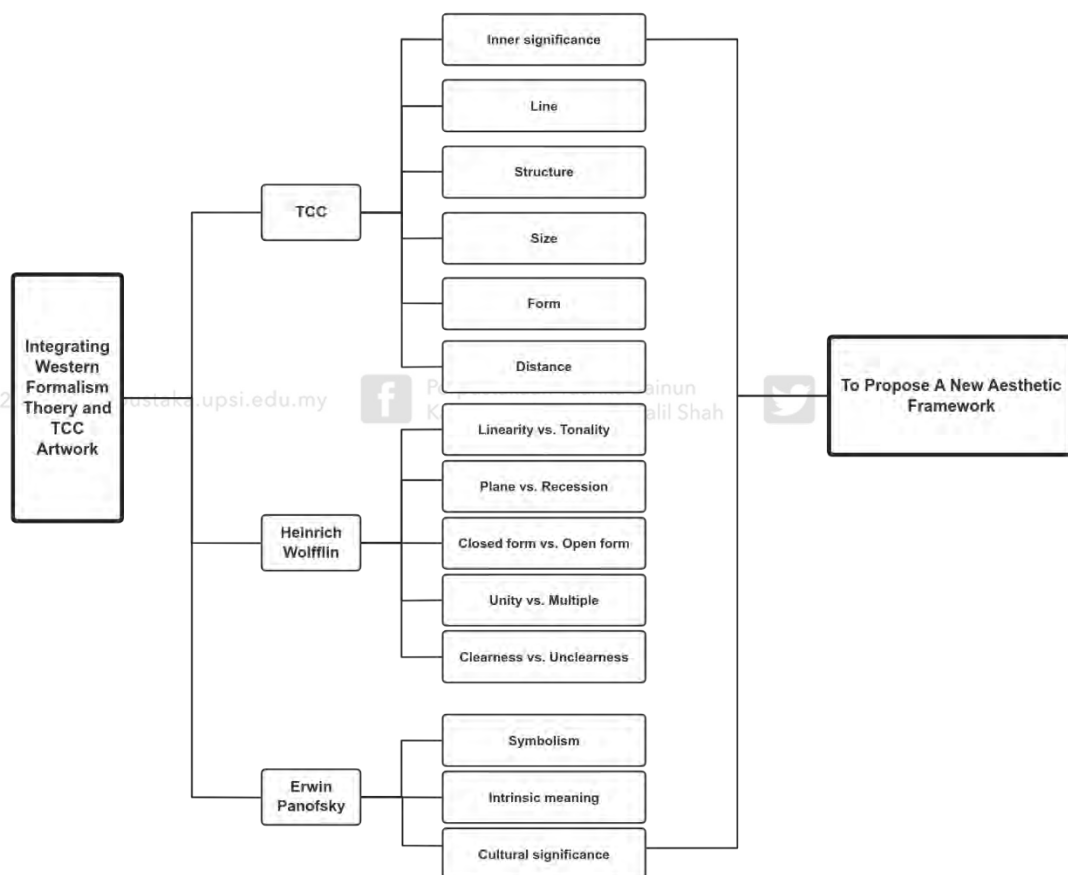


## 1.10 Conceptual Framework

In this research, the conceptual diagram follows:

**Figure 1. 8**

*Conceptual Framework*



According to the conceptual framework, this study revolves around three fundamental theoretical concepts: traditional Chinese calligraphy, Heinrich Wölfflin's formalism theory, and Erwin Panofsky's iconological theory. The examination of traditional Chinese calligraphy in this research is divided into two primary aspects: the inner significance and the formalism of artwork. Regarding the formalism of artwork,



the analysis focuses on five specific elements: line, structure, size, form, and distance. These elements serve as the framework for understanding the visual and structural characteristics of calligraphic works.

Heinrich Wölfflin's formalism theory, as originally conceptualized, consists of five key pairs of opposing principles: linearity versus tonality, plane versus recession, closed form versus open form, unity versus multiple, and clearness versus unclearness. In the context of this study, Wölfflin's theoretical framework is specifically applied to analyze the formal aspects of traditional Chinese calligraphy, particularly the formalism of the artwork component. This application and its corresponding findings are thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4 of the research.

Erwin Panofsky's iconological theory introduces a three-dimensional approach to art analysis, comprising pre-iconographic description (first level), iconographic analysis (second level), and iconological interpretation (third level). Within this study, Panofsky's theory is employed to examine the inner significance of traditional Chinese calligraphic artworks. The pre-iconographic description focuses on the formal qualities, the iconographic analysis investigates conventional meanings, while the iconological interpretation delves into the broader cultural and historical contexts. Similar to Wölfflin's application, the utilization of Panofsky's theory and its results are presented in detail in Chapter 4.

For precise definitions and conceptual boundaries of these key terms, readers may refer to the Definition of Terms section of this research. The study maintains strict adherence to these theoretical frameworks throughout the analytical process, ensuring





consistency in methodology and interpretation. The integration of these three conceptual approaches - traditional Chinese calligraphy's aspects, Wölfflin's formalism theory concepts, and Panofsky's iconological concepts - forms the comprehensive conceptual foundation for this investigation into Chinese calligraphic art.

### 1.10.1 Research Gap

The current research landscape reveals several significant gaps in the integration of Western formalism theory with traditional Chinese calligraphy that this study aims to address. First and foremost, while numerous studies have examined the five major Chinese calligraphic styles (seal, clerical, regular, running, and cursive scripts; Shi, 2017; Wu et al., 2020), there remains a striking absence of systematic attempts to analyze these styles through the lens of Wölfflin's formalist principles (Zhao, 2018). This theoretical gap is particularly notable given Greenberg's (1982) assertion about the importance of traditional roots in art evaluation, and the potential correlations between Wölfflin's 5 concepts (linearity vs. tonality, plane vs. recession, closed vs. open form, unity vs. multiple, and clearness vs. unclearness) and the visual characteristics of Chinese calligraphy (Bullen & Richard, 2010, pp. 243-254).

A second critical gap emerges in methodological approaches to calligraphy analysis. Current digital methods, while technologically sophisticated (Li et al., 2009), have proven fundamentally limited in their ability to capture the essence of Chinese calligraphy, as demonstrated by Chen's (2023) critique of Western formalist





quantitative analysis frameworks. Techniques such as Gray-Level Co-occurrence Matrix analysis, while effective for quantifying visual patterns, inevitably reduce complex brushwork to spatial probability models, stripping away the philosophical and cultural dimensions that scholars like Li (2020) and Zhang (2018) have identified as essential to authentic calligraphic appreciation. This methodological reductionism highlights the urgent need for an analytical framework capable of bridging quantitative formal analysis with qualitative cultural interpretation.

The cultural adaptation of Western theories presents a third major research gap. As Von Orelli-Messerli (2020) demonstrated through the formal isomorphism of Poussin's paintings and Corneille's literature, Western formalism's mechanism for capturing the spirit of the age fails when confronted with Chinese calligraphy. Similarly, Mrugalski et al. (2022) showed how Panofsky's "theory of estrangement" overlooks the unique transformational logic of Chinese character structure due to its Western-centric perspective. These theories fail to account for key aspects of Chinese calligraphy identified in the problem statement, including the dynamic brushwork techniques, the unique structural logic of Chinese characters, and the profound influence of Daoist and Confucian philosophy (Bullen & Richard, 2010). While these limitations have been identified, the field still lacks practical solutions that would allow for the productive adaptation of Western theories to Eastern artistic traditions.

Finally, the digital age has introduced new challenges that existing frameworks are ill-equipped to handle, despite the growing urgency noted by Zhao (2018). The impact of digital reproduction on calligraphic authenticity (as referenced in Walter Benjamin's work cited in Greenberg, 1982), the emergence of hybrid digital-traditional





artworks (Li, 2020), and the need for standardized cross-cultural evaluation methods in globalized art markets all represent areas where current scholarship falls short. These contemporary challenges demand innovative approaches that can honor traditional aesthetics while engaging with modern technological realities.

This study seeks to address these interconnected gaps by developing a comprehensive analytical framework that systematically applies and adapts Wölfflin's principles to Chinese calligraphy while incorporating Panofsky's iconological theory. The proposed framework aims to provide both quantitative tools and qualitative tools for formal analysis and qualitative methods for cultural interpretation, offering art scholars and practitioners a more nuanced approach to cross-cultural aesthetic evaluation in both traditional and digital contexts. By bridging these theoretical, methodological, and practical gaps, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue between Eastern and Western artistic traditions while meeting the evolving needs of contemporary art practice and scholarship identified by Li (2020) and Zhang (2018).

### **1.10.2 Operational Terminologies**

This study establishes precise operational definitions for key concepts through a synthesis of Western formalist theory and traditional Chinese calligraphic principles. The framework incorporates direct translations and interpretations of Chinese scholarly concepts to ensure an authentic representation of calligraphic aesthetics while maintaining analytical rigor.





Traditional Chinese calligraphy is operationally defined as encompassing the five canonical script styles Seal script, Clerical script, Regular script, Running script, and Cursive script) that developed during the Qin to Tang dynasties (221 BCE-618 CE). The analysis adopts the Chinese scholarly perspective that calligraphy represents "art of form creation that" expresses meaning through linear forms" (Yang, 2018, p. 112). This examination pays particular attention to what Chinese scholars term "brush technique, "character structure," and "compositional arrangement," - the three essential elements of calligraphy identified by Lin (2023).

The formalism of artwork is measured through five elements derived from Chinese calligraphic theory:

- a. **Line:** Evaluated according to Chinese aesthetic criteria including "textural quality, "rhythmic quality, "strength, "velocity", and "cadence" (Yang, 2018). These characteristics emerge from what calligraphers describe as "initiated from the starting point, extending directionally to form straight lines or changing direction to create curves"(Yang, 2018, p. 113).
- b. **Structure:** Assessed through the principle that "even a slight displacement of a single stroke can transform the entire character structure" (Liu, 2012, p. 45).
- c. **Form:** Analyzed through script-specific features-regular and irregular.
- d. **Distance:** Measured by "spatial relationships between characters in all directions" as part of "compositional arrangement" (Lin, 2023).





- e. Size: Evaluated through "proportional relationships of characters" in composition.

The inner significance dimension employs Panofsky's method to examine what Chinese scholars describe as "meaningful forms" (Yang, 2018) that contain "connotation and deeper representative meaning." This analysis pays particular attention to the "unique aesthetic characteristics" and "modes of expression" that Chinese theorists identify in calligraphic lines (Yang, 2018).

Wölfflin's formalist theory is adapted through incorporation of Chinese aesthetic principles:

- a. The linearity/tonality dichotomy is reinterpreted through the lens of "brush technique" and "ink tonality" dynamics.
- b. Plane/recession concepts are modified to account for "black-white relationships" in ink distribution.
- c. Form principles are expanded to incorporate character's form contrasts emphasized in Chinese composition.

These adaptations preserve what Chinese scholars term "the soul of calligraphic art" (Yang, 2018, p. 112) while enabling systematic formal analysis. The complete methodology, including detailed translation and interpretation procedures for Chinese aesthetic concepts, is presented in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.





## 1.11 Summary

This chapter explains and describes the introduction of the research such as the background of the study, problem statement, objectives of the research, three research questions, the importance of research, limitations of the research, and the operational definitions of the terms used. Chapter Two presents the literature review of the research.

