

## The Challenges of Teaching Calligraphy in Shaanxi Province in China

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### **Abstract**

*One of the most essential part of China's traditional culture is calligraphy. Regardless of today's development, calligraphy is still noted to be an integral element of Chinese society. Teaching Calligraphy teaching in colleges and universities ensures the continuity of the tradition and culture but it faces challenges that becomes a factor in its cultural transmission. Therefore, this paper first introduces and describes calligraphy as an integral element of traditional Chinese culture, then the encountered challenges in teaching calligraphy education in colleges and universities in China*

**Keywords:** *Quality Calligraphy Education, Challenges, Students Low Motivation, Lack of Teaching Methods, Homogenous, Subject Insignificance, Curriculum Reform*

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### **1. Introduction**

Calligraphy has been an integral element of Chinese traditional culture it transcends the historical period of China. The study of calligraphy primary role in universities and colleges in China was to improve students writing ability, but they should appreciate Chinese culture in the process, and obtain a healthy body and mind. Calligraphy subject started in the different universities and colleges in China in the 1960's initiated by in

Nanjing University of The Arts, Nanjing Normal University, Beijing Normal University, and soon other colleges and universities followed their steps. As of today, there are 69 colleges and universities in China offer calligraphy as a major, and many more offer calligraphy as a public course (Peng, M.F;2022). Calligraphy education is part of the contemporary college education system where students are introduced to cultural education and enhances their abilities and

skills with regards to traditional Chinese culture.

However, there are some problems that calligraphy education is facing today, like the lack of clear understanding and positioning of the value of calligraphy, the lack of Chinese character literacy, and the confusion of the criteria for judging calligraphy, in the paper "On the lack of aesthetic appreciation of contemporary calligraphy for the public". We should actively guide the public and improve the ability of calligraphy aesthetic education(Yu,2021).

From the research of the above experts, it can be gleaned that calligraphy and aesthetic

education management is facing many challenges. This became an avenue for the researcher to look into the current situation of the calligraphy and aesthetic education Xi'an University of Technology and Shaanxi Normal University of Shaanxi Province as an example, adopts the qualitative research method, and puts forward scientific and reasonable response strategies for its challenges, hoping to provide new ideas for the development of the calligraphy and aesthetic education management of college students so that they will be the new generation that lives "poetically" and "aesthetically".(Zeng,2007)

### **Method**

The researcher had used a qualitative descriptive study using in depth interview, focus group discussion and document analysis to gather information regarding the problem. Qualitative descriptive design is used when a rich, straight description of an experience or an event is required (Neegard et al,2009; Matthew and Ross,2010). This design seeks to obtain direct and straight descriptions of an event.

The researcher used a maximum variation sampling to target key informants (the students, teachers and experts in Shaanxi Province) in order to address the objectives of the study. The researcher used in depth interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis as the data collection method. Interview and Focus group are used when information regarding a specific topic

needs to be collected.

### **Results and Discussion**

After research, the researcher found the following challenges in the teaching calligraphy:

#### **Student's Low Enthusiasm**

Most students don't really give too much importance to calligraphy due to the fact that for them it's just "elective"(S1,S2,S3; Personal Communication, March 27,2023) and to them calligraphy is "boring" (S5,S6,S10, S11, S13 Personal Communication, March 27,2023) and "not interesting" (S4,S7, S8,S9, S14; Personal Communication, March 27,2023) and it was probed further why students found it boring the results showed that students has less participation that they are "directed" (S5, S7, S8,S14, S12; Personal

Communication, March 27,2023) and calligraphy is taught with “no variation of strategies done by the teacher” (S4, S7, S8, S15; Personal Communication, March 27,2023) and he is just using “single method/lecture method” (S4, S5,S6, S9, S10,S11,S12, S13 Personal Communication, March 27,2023). When the teachers was asked on the reasons why students lack interest in calligraphy is that they “don’t give much importance”(T3 Personal Communication, March 29,2023)while other teachers said that “this may be due to gadgets, and technology” (T1,T6 Personal Communication, March 28,2023) and the “traditional way of teaching” (T2, T5, t8; Personal Communication, March 29,2023)

The quality of knowledge to be obtained and the formation of their character would be depended on the motivation of the student(Vivou et al,2005; Prameswari et al,2020) and interestingness of a stimulus (Berlyne, 1971; Jacobsen, 2016), . How the students shows enthusiasm play a big role in his/her learning, his low enthusiasm has a magnitude to his self, ability and character development (Pogacnik & Cigic, 2006; Prameswari et al., 2020). The challenge for teachers teaching calligraphy is for them to recognize their students and let them participate in the class so that they can engage learning and enhance their skills.(Schiefele,1996; Papastergiou, 2009; Prameswari et al., 2020) re learning the strategies and methods of teaching can have a great impact on the students learning, interest, and enthusiasm (Abrahams, 2007;Zorn et al.,

2019, Prameswari et al,2020).

### **Calligraphy has no significance**

There is difficulty for students to be interested if they don’t see the relevance of calligraphy. Negative perceptions that it is ‘irrelevant’ to daily life are a major challenge to overcome. According to the students Calligraphy is irrelevant because it “has no practical value or use” (S1, S2, S8, S10,S14; Personal Communication, March 27,2023) and their focus is their “courses which has significant value in their lives”(S4, S5,S6,S7, S15; Personal Communication, March 27,2023) and that calligraphy “has no practical use or value”(S3,S9,S11,S12,s13;Personal Communication, March 27,2023).

The teachers interviewed also agree that most students don’t see calligraphy as relevant as some teachers said that “their concentration is their courses and they spend much time for it” (T1, T5, T6, T7, T8; Personal Communication, March 28-29, 2023) as other teachers observed that students are “practical/pragmatic and they just focus on to something that is useful for them” (T2, T3, T4,T9, T10; Personal Communication, March 28-29,2023)

This idea enhances the notion that calligraphy is just for other learners. In today’s scenario students are facing the increasing pressure from school and they are concerned about their career prospects and their future and thus calligraphy is ‘not useful’ for addressing what a students urgency today. Appreciation of calligraphy in today’s

perspective depends on the students emotional state (Konecni, 1979; Jacobsen, 2010), appeal to social status or financial interest (Konecni, 1979; Ritterfeld, 2002; Jacobsen, 2010)

Therefore the teacher must reflect on his/her role in changing student's outlook into a better and deep interest in learning (Butler, 2007; Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015; Prameswari et al,2020).

### **Students are treated alike**

Students have a wide diversity of attitudes and experiences as they said "Teachers don't recognize other talents" (S1, S16, S18, S19,S21; Personal Communication, March 27,2023)"we are treated as one" (S22, S24, S28, S29,S30; Personal Communication, March 27,2023). Teachers sometimes lack a nuanced understanding of the diversity of the students due "the lack of trainings/seminars on this"(T2, T3, T4, T9, T10; Personal Communication, March 28-29,2023) and how the calligraphy as "a tradition is taught"(T7, T8, T11; Personal Communication, March 28-29,2023). This is an attitudinal barrier which lies within the universities themselves. Students are far from a homogenous group. Each student has an innumerable differences in attitudes, experiences, class and other factors between different individuals. Treating everyone the same is therefore a significant barrier to engagement in which it was also the research findings of Wei He(2018).

Colleges and universities in China should not only cultivate students' scientific spirit, rational thinking and excellent professional knowledge and skills, but also enable students to have sound personality, profound cultural heritage and noble spiritual pursuit. Therefore, it is urgent for colleges and universities to improve on how they look at their students in terms of their ability towards calligraphy and aesthetic education.

Self-motivation can be considered as one of the processes that greatly affects the students' achievement (Amirkhanovaa et al., 2016; Prameswari et al,2020). Stimulation of motivation can be realized through intense interactions between teachers and students and also the learning environment (Abrahams, 2009; Prameswari et al,2020). The teacher plays a role in changing student's saturation into an interest in learning (Butler, 2007; Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015; Prameswari et al,2020).

### **A Question on Teachers' Teaching Mastery**

At present, the ability of calligraphic aesthetic education teachers in some colleges and universities is uneven, and there is a lack of talents specialized in calligraphic aesthetic education. Teachers admitted that "they need more training and seminars" (T2, T3, T4, T9,

T10; Personal Communication, March 28-29,2023). Aesthetic education has not yet formed an independent discipline.

It is true that there is no teaching strategy that will consistently engage all learners( Wlodkowski, R & Ginsberg, M,1995; Barberos et al,2017). Teachers need to vary appropriate teaching styles and techniques so as to improve and have a positive impact to students learning (DeMonbrun et al. ,2017; Filges et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). Several teaching styles will encourage students to become self-motivated independent learners (Weinert and Kluwe,1987; Barberos et al,2017). Teachers must go deep and understand the strengths, interests and the expectations of the students( Brock,1976; Cashin,1979; Lucas,1990; Barberos et al,2017). There is a need for Calligraphy teachers to take into consideration students' needs and interests so as to focus instruction that is applicable to different groups of students with different levels so that we will be able to meet the requirements of the current talent training model and the development of the teaching system(Zhu, 2014; Ding,2018).

### **Calligraphy aesthetic education curriculum is not updated**

The most important way for colleges and universities to carry out calligraphy aesthetic education is to carry out classroom education. Its problem is that the implementation approach is too simple, which also leads to the development of calligraphy aesthetic

education classroom cannot meet the needs of students to cultivate aesthetic level due to its small proportion of the whole curriculum system. One of the characteristics of aesthetic education in Harvard University is to combine aesthetic education with the practical needs of various disciplines, and highlight the applied value and function of aesthetic activities such as art. Stockholm University in Sweden has a professional and independent aesthetic education institution - the Institute of Aesthetic Education. These internationally renowned universities are at the forefront of the world in the subject construction and curriculum setting of aesthetic education teaching.(Li,2020).However, the number of students who can choose aesthetic education courses in our university is limited, so few students can really systematically learn the theoretical knowledge of calligraphy aesthetic education courses. In addition, the content setting of calligraphy aesthetic education course has certain backwardness and shallow dominance. (Wu,2019)

Aesthetic Education should be the rooted to the norms and behavioral values (Lierat, 2016; Wulansari, 2017) and cultural learning should be in the social sphere (Zubieta, 2016). We have to bear in mind that the young plays an important role in the cultural heritage of the nation through the wisdom of art and culture (Saud, 2020; Widja, 2012). A reform in aesthetic education should be done for the younger generation for a change in their values (Krauss et al., 2008; Hanif, 2016;), to increase students motivation (Wahyuningsih, 2012), not to be ignored (Sumarni et al., 2018)

insignificant (Mustika et al.,2013).

The reform should make students more enthusiastic and engaged. It should have an impact to value the subjects and to develop their soft skills and character-building (Kahu et al., 2017) so that it will not be neglected (Pell & Jarvis, 2001).

### Conclusion

This research tries to find out the challenges of teaching calligraphy and aesthetic education in colleges and universities of Shaanxi Province. The results of the first research state that students have a low motivation in learning, students find the subject is insignificant and they are treated alike. The result of the second research states teachers' lack mastery of teaching and the update on the curriculum which contributed to the decrease the students' learning and motivation to calligraphy. Therefore, the implementation of calligraphy as an aesthetic education, require trainings and seminars for teachers to have a mastery of teaching the subject and to review the curriculum for a better learning. Also, the results of this study assert that, appropriate learning methods as well may improve students' learning motivation. Learning experience builds a self-awareness and self-capacity improvement. Calligraphy has its own uniqueness that emphasize creativity and appreciation of art and culture itself. Effective methods and curriculum enhancement may help enhance the student's motivation. This research focused only on colleges and universities of Shaanxi Province but other

alternatives though can be conducted using the different nature scope.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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