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# Problems and the Coping Measures in American Beginners' Chinese Calligraphy Writing

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## ABSTRACT

Through class observations and interviews, this study identified eight types of writing errors that American beginners of Chinese calligraphy. These errors include: (1) failure to apply the Chinese philosophical mindset when producing a real work of calligraphy, (2) dropping some stroke(s) or stroke part(s), (3) misplaced strokes, (4) improperly connected strokes, (5) misshapen curved strokes, (6) disproportionate component size, (7) incorrect thickness and character size, and (8) angled vertical strokes. These errors reflect the students' lack of knowledge of Chinese characters, the writing skills, and the application of Yin and Yang philosophy. Corresponding instructions and guidance are needed to help American beginners cope with these issues.

**Keywords:** American students, Chinese calligraphy writing, problems, coping

Culture is intertwined with language, and thus cannot be separated from language learning (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014; Sapir, 2014). The American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has identified five goal areas of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, referred to as "The Five C's", i.e., Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (ACTFL, 2013). Chinese calligraphy has played a very important role in defining and refining China's culture, and is regarded as the quintessence of Chinese culture (Chen, 2003). Both in China and abroad, Calligraphy has been widely practiced, and, for much of history, calligraphy was valued in China as one of the four most important skills (i.e., playing musical instruments, chess playing, calligraphic writing, and painting, or 琴, 棋, 书, and 画, in Chinese) when evaluating a person's scholarship. As an important channel of demonstrating traditional culture and art, Chinese calligraphy was listed as intangible cultural heritage in 2009 by UNESCO (2010). There is no doubt that, by studying and practicing calligraphy, learners can deepen their understanding of Chinese language and culture (Li & Yu, 2015).

## 1 Introduction of Chinese Calligraphy

Chinese calligraphy is the art of using a writing brush to write Chinese characters in certain artistic styles. These styles, or scripts, include the seal, clerical, regular, running, and cursive scripts (篆, 隶, 楷, 行, and 草, in Chinese). Chinese calligraphy was thought to have begun alongside the initial creation of Chinese characters (Qian & Fang, 2007).

When practicing any particular script of calligraphy, one must first learn the associated rules. All of the styles of script share certain basic rules, although each has its unique aesthetic appearance. These rules govern the writing of strokes, component layout, the shaping of characters, the overall composition, among other aspects. This makes writing calligraphy similar to drawing or painting than standard writing. To make or evaluate high-level calligraphy works, extra rules have also been established. Based on these rules, good calligraphy should be able to express the essence of the content while also conveying the calligrapher's mental and emotional state. To apply these rules, or in other words, to produce good calligraphy, calligraphers need to apply their technical skills and talents to sizing the strokes, characters, and components, aligning, spacing, coloring, coordinating, and pacing themselves as they write a piece (Li & Yu, 2015).

From the audience's perspective, however, a piece of calligraphy cannot only be viewed through the techniques used and the piece's physical attributes. Hidden insights are the other important dimension to calligraphy, which may include the dynamics, rhythm, emotion, and even the calligrapher's personality (Li & Yu, 2015). The beauty and complexity of Chinese calligraphy has led the practice to be called wordless poetry, a figureless dance, an imageless picture, and soundless music (无言之诗, 无形之舞, 无图之画, 无声之乐, in Chinese) (Liu, 2012). Western scholars have given Chinese calligraphy accolades, stating that it contains the beauty of an image in a painting, the flow of a dance, and of rhythm in music simultaneously (Guo, 1995).

Additionally, the writing of calligraphy must be directed by traditional Chinese philosophical ideas, such as the balance between Yin and Yang from Taoism (Qian & Fang, 2007). There are many other aspects that must be taken into account, by both writers and observers, such as *qing* [情, mood, emotion], *qi* [气, energy, vital force], *shen* [神, spirit], *jing* [境, realm, standing], *yun* [韵, elegance], *fa* [法, discipline], *yi* [意, expressiveness], *fengge* [风格, style], and *qidu* [气度, manner] (Ni, 1999). All of these special characteristics of calligraphy, as well as the common principles, should be incorporated into writing practice.

## **2 Status and Issues of Chinese Calligraphy Teaching and Learning in the U.S.**

Chinese calligraphy, as a course, is currently quite popular in American universities. Li & Yu (2013) conducted a cross sectional study by checking the course listings of 50 top universities in the U.S. between the Fall 2011 and Spring 2014 school years. The results showed that 60% of these universities offered Chinese calligraphy courses. These courses are offered both as for-credit and non-credit purposes, and the majority of learners were undergraduate students, with a small number of graduate students and community members making up the rest.

However, longtime classroom observations (Li, 2015) show that American students often encounter a lot of problems when first beginning to learn and practice Chinese calligraphy. If these problems are left uncorrected, it results in the student being unable to produce calligraphy

proficiently. Unfortunately, literature search has failed to yield any empirical or theoretical study discussing calligraphy writing issues. This pedagogical report is then aimed at initiating an investigation on calligraphy writing errors that can inform calligraphy instruction.

## **3 Methods**

### **3.1 Research Design and Procedure**

This is a qualitative study contextualized in real college Chinese calligraphy classrooms. The researchers and instructors observe students' in- and after-class calligraphy writing work, and identify the most typical, i.e., frequently made, errors. An analysis is then conducted to identify the patterns of the errors identified.

### **3.2 Error Identification**

The focus of this study is both stroke writing and the shaping of whole characters in the regular calligraphic style. In class, students are taught calligraphy writing techniques, criteria, principles, and philosophy at the levels of stroke, component, and whole character with sample characters. And then, students are given character models to copy both in class and after. The instructors will identify the problematically written characters against the criteria, principles, and philosophy, which is all confirmed with experienced calligraphy teachers and practitioners. If a specific problem is observed three or more times in all students' work, one typical character would be chosen for a pattern analysis so that a certain number of these patterns can be found. To validate the patterns identified, an informal, confirmatory interview will then follow with the students. The confirmed patterns of problems are then reported.

### **3.3 Interview Questions**

Two questions were asked in the interviews, which were asked without revealing to the student the problems the instructor found in order to avoid any potential misleading effect. The first was "If you compare the model character with the one you wrote, do you see any problems?". The purpose behind asking this question was for students to see the same problems identified by the instructor on their own. The second question was "Let's compare these similar characters written by you and others. Is there any pattern to the problems? What are the reasons behind the pattern?". The second question set was used to determine if the students understood the error pattern.

### **3.4 Participants**

This is a classroom-based study conducted between 2013 and 2017 in two four-year universities. The first is a private university in Pennsylvania, and the other is a public university in Ohio. Over an eight-semester period, a total of 145 students were observed. Among them, 76 were born in the U.S. and had no prior Chinese character writing experience while the other 79 were from

Korea, China, Japan, or another Asian country, and had written Chinese characters before. Since the problems in writing calligraphy were mostly observed in the unexperienced group, the sample characters used in the analysis were all selected from the work submitted by the students of this group. The confirmatory interviews that took place were also between the instructor and this group.

## 4 Results

Several problems were found in the study, produced by both Americans and students from other countries in their calligraphy writing. One common problem is that, for example, beginning students treat calligraphy writing as drawing which happens most frequently right after they are taught how to write the beginning and the end of individual strokes. Rather than writing out the stroke to get the intended stroke thickness, the students will “draw” the beginning and the end of a horizontal or vertical stroke of a regular calligraphy style (see Figure 1) because their teachers have told them to write a triangle-shaped beginning and a similar-shaped end of the stroke. The best way of correcting this problem is to ask students to write a stroke or character without these artificial ends, and then keep practicing until “writing,” as opposed to “drawing,” becomes the natural way. However, due to the different background of American students, some issues have been found specifically in American classrooms, and thus need special attention. For example, American students do not come into the calligraphy class with the knowledge of how yin and yang should effect the balance of each stroke and character, while Chinese students know about this principle already. Moreover, Chinese characters are new to American students in that the characters, composed by strokes and radicals rather than letters, do not make sense to the students.

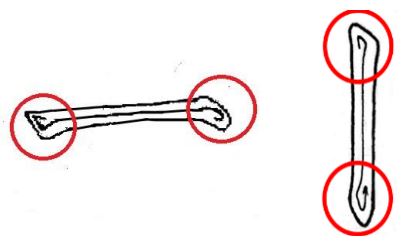


Figure 1 One type of horizontal stroke and vertical stroke

Except for the problems in common, seven categories of errors were identified from the American students' calligraphy work.

**Problem 1: Failure to apply the Chinese philosophical mindset when producing a real work of calligraphy**

As the most important element of Chinese culture and philosophical mindset, *Yin* and *Yang* are easily understood, but it is difficult to represent them in works of calligraphy. Teachers must incorporate the relevant culture and philosophy into the curriculum, and then illustrate the ideas

repeatedly while teaching. When writing 日, for example, the teacher should tell students how to incorporate Yin and Yang in it in multiple ways such as below:

- (1) By applying ink: the black and white colors can be treated the unity of yin and yang;
- (2) By applying thickness: the left-side vertical stroke is thinner (yin) while the right side vertical is thicker (yang);
- (3) Applying length: the left-side vertical stroke is shorter (yin) than the right-side is longer (yang);
- (4) Applying strokes' angular and roundness: A sharp end is yang, and the roundness is yin.

Students also need to reflect on these ideas to further their understanding, and then show the application in later practice.



Figure 2 Chinese character 日 (the Sun; day)

Problem 2. Dropping some stroke(s) or stroke part(s)

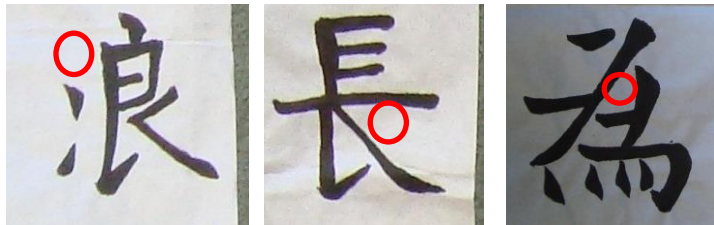


Figure 3 Characters with missing strokes

This problem is that students will often drop either part of a stroke, or a full stroke entirely, when forming a character (see Figure 3). This can happen for two main reasons. The first is that around half of the students have either not realized, or forgot, that a stroke was present in the original character. The other main reason is that another 40% of the students think that calligraphy is a purely creative task, so they should make each character unique to their own personal style, and thus will randomly shape or omit strokes or stroke parts. The best way to approach this problem is to teach the students about the various styles and scripts of calligraphy, as well as the meaning of the radicals and components. This will give the students a better idea of the importance behind each part of the character when it comes to writing, as well as the rules governing them.

Problem 3. Misplaced strokes

A third common problem is that the student will misplace the character's strokes (see Figure 4). This is usually due to the fact that the student is unaware what the misplaced parts of the

character mean in the whole character of radical, and how they effect the overall balance. Like the issue of missing parts, this can be remedied by teaching the students what each part of the character means, as well as what the elements of those components are. Teaching about the philosophy behind the writing, such as Yin and Yang, can also help the student how to think about the character before they begin to write it.

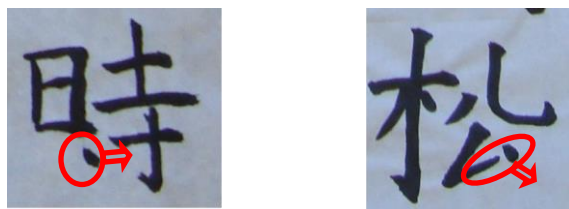


Figure 4 Misplaced strokes

#### Problem 4. Improperly connected strokes

Another common problem is that the student will connect strokes improperly, leading to a misshapen character (see Figure 5). This can arise due to the student not knowing the parts of the character, and especially if they cannot identify the various strokes that make it up. A good way to correct this problem is to teach students the history of each character, especially the original pictographs, and the meaning behind each stroke in them. This helps illustrate the importance behind each stroke's shape, length, location, and connection within the character.

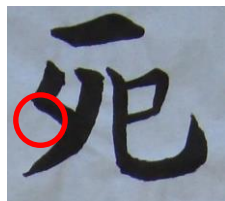


Figure 5 Improperly connected strokes

#### Problem 5. Misshapen curved strokes



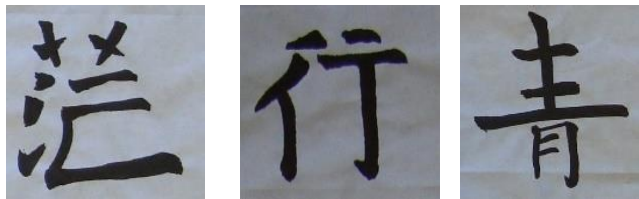
Figure 6 Misshapen curved strokes

After students first start writing the curved strokes, they will often misshape them such as being unexpectedly too curved, uneven, or straight as the three characters show respectively (see Figure 6). This is typically due to the student being unable to determine just how curved the stroke should be from the perspective of the whole character's shape. To remedy this problem,

teach the students how to write the relevant curved strokes individually, and guide their practice until they start to get the right shape. Assigning further practice with similar characters will also help to reinforce the proper techniques.

#### Problem 6. Disproportionate component size

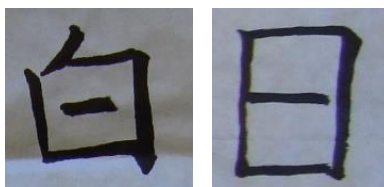
Another very common problem is that students will write characters with very disproportionate components (see Figure 7). This occurs when the student is unable to make the right sized strokes and components in relation to the specific character's shape and size. Using model characters for corrective practice can help a student learn how the characters overall shape should look. Encouraging them to use grid paper is also very helpful, as it helps the students learn how much space each stroke and component should take up.



*Figure 7* Disproportionate component size

#### Problem 7. Incorrect thickness and character size

Many students also struggle to write each stroke with the proper thickness, as well as writing each character the proper size (see Figure 8). This occurs when the student has not learned the general principles behind writing characters, i.e., the fewer the strokes, the smaller the character, and the thicker its strokes. When students are taught this principle, and then guided in corrective practice, they will learn to judge how to write a character based off of the number of strokes it contains.



*Figure 8* Incorrect thickness and character size

#### Problem 8. Angled vertical strokes

When writing characters with vertical strokes, students will often fail to make them actually vertical (see Figure 9). This is due to students not knowing another general writing principle, i.e., that vertical strokes must be strictly upright. Like the problem of thickness and character size, teaching the students the principles behind writing characters, as well as guiding them in corrective practice, will help to eliminate this issue.



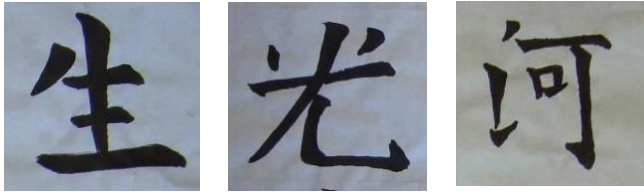


Figure 9 Angled vertical strokes

In summary, eight types of calligraphic errors are identified. These errors are related with the shaping, size, and placement of strokes, components, and/or the whole character. And these problematic writing issues reflect the students' lack of knowledge of Chinese characters, the writing skills, and the application of Yin and Yang philosophy.

## 5 Conclusion and Discussion

When students, especially those who have not practiced writing Chinese in the past, begin to practice calligraphy, they often require guidance in order to properly write characters. Depending on the type of mistake they are making, there are several ways to help guide them. First and foremost is teaching the principles behind writing calligraphy, such as line thickness, the angle of strokes, and the size of characters. These principles can be reinforced through guided practice of problematic characters or strokes, in order to help students learn what they are doing wrong, and how to handle the brush in order to write correctly. Teaching the history of the various styles of calligraphic script, as well as the history of the characters themselves, also helps students understand the shapes and the meaning behind the various components of characters. This grants the opportunity to explore the radicals and components, which in turn will help students learn the strokes and their order, as well as the spacing of entire characters. In order to further internalize these practices, design focused exercises to give students more opportunity to challenge themselves and further refine their abilities. Lastly, encourage students to enroll in a Chinese language course. By studying the language, students will become much more familiar with characters and the importance of the various components that make them up.

While these techniques have been used successfully in classrooms, this study is not without its limitations. If an individual character has multiple problems, it may require a new approach at discussing the very ideas behind calligraphy, not outlined here. Another limitation is that the list of problems discussed is not complete. The research conducted is based off of specific class rooms and students within the United States, so problems that did not arise in this experience were not analyzed. A third limitation is these coping strategies may not be effective in other class rooms. Depending on the students and their individual experiences, they may require different approaches to learn how to overcome these issues. More research is needed on this subject in order to help identify more common problems that students encounter, as well as discovering new ways to teach students to cope with the difficulties of learning calligraphy.

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## 美国学生初学中国书法常见书写问题及处理

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本研究通过对美国初级中文书法课的课堂观察和对美国初学学生的访谈，发现美国书法初学者常犯八种书法书写错误：（1）缺乏中国阴阳哲学的应用，（2）笔画全部或部分缺失，（3）笔画错置，（4）笔画误连，（5）曲笔错误，（6）大小比例失调，（7）笔画粗细及整字大小错误，（8）直笔歪斜。这些错误反应了美国学生缺乏汉字知识、书写技能、阴阳思维应用能力。教学中应教授相关知识、有针对性指导训练，帮助他们解决这些问题。

**关键词:** 美国学生，中国书法，问题，应对