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Chinese calligraphy from a cross-cultural perspective: Comparison of aesthetic and cultural perceptions between China and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Chinese calligraphy, a classic symbol of Chinese culture, embodies rich cultural thought and aesthetic sensibilities. This study examines how South African participants perceive and interpret Chinese calligraphy within a cross-cultural context, using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework. Through online focus groups and in-depth interviews, it explores participants' aesthetic evaluations and cultural perceptions, revealing both disconnected responses, such as misunderstandings, confusion and rejection, and affirmative responses, including curiosity, resonance and appreciation. Feedback from participants has further shaped a cominterpretant, a shared understanding that emerged through processes of modification, blending and re-creation. The findings highlight the merging, empathy, integration and mutual construction of Chinese and South African cultures. By analysing the symbolic interpretation and emotional experience of Chinese calligraphy, this study highlights the commonalities, differences and points of integration in the aesthetic and cultural perceptions of the two countries. It expands the space for Chinese–South African cultural exchanges based on intersubjectives and mutual construction, offering refreshing insights to enable enhanced cross-cultural understanding and mutual learning.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese calligraphy, painting, martial arts and traditional medicine are gaining exposure among the South African public through grassroots exchanges (Anon. 2025). Fostered by government agencies, diverse people-to-people interactions between the two countries span education, culture, health, sports, science and technology, media, tourism and youth. According to Zhang and Ouyang (2024), cultural groups from South Africa and China have frequently visited each other's countries for performances and events. Furthermore, China and South Africa have cultural complementarities that are largely under-studied. For example, Ubuntu, a South African ideology and philosophy, represents the core values of African ontology, emphasizing 'humanity, compassion, and social responsibility' and collective solidarity (Sambala et al. 2019: 1). The Chinese philosophy and culture of harmony and togetherness have similar expressions.

However, certain objective conditions still have limited cultural exchanges between China and South Africa. To deepen their strategic partnership, China and South Africa still need to strengthen people-to-people exchanges, including academic exchanges between universities and think tanks, exchanges between cultural figures, media exchanges and a balance of official diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy (Zhang and Ouyang 2024). Analysing South Africans' views of Chinese culture is timely, necessary and urgent, especially when many discussions – both academic and non-academic – lack a clear understanding of the logic of interpretation, meaning-making processes and the cultural negotiation of Chinese cultural symbols such as calligraphy.

The cultural characteristics reflected in Chinese calligraphy may offer viewers a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of Chinese civilization and its humanistic ethos (Zhu and Xiao 2025). From a cross-cultural perspective, using Chinese calligraphy as a medium, this study explores the symbolic interpretation, aesthetic and cultural perceptions and emotional experiences of Chinese cultural symbols in the South African cultural context, as well as the reasons for their emergence. This study offers new insights

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into intersubjectivity-based people-to-people cross-cultural communication between China and South Africa.

A REVIEW OF CULTURAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN CHINA AND SOUTH AFRICA

History and current state

Cultural exchanges between China and South Africa are vibrant and evolving, driven by projects that are led by state actors and people-to-people exchanges, which are two intertwined threads. The deepening of China–South Africa ties has gained significant momentum in the twenty-first century. Benyi (2017) notes that, within the BRICS framework, bilateral relations and multilateral connections have substantially intensified as both nations pursue strengthened South–South cooperation, prompting a shift in South Africa’s foreign policy. Meanwhile, the essence of China–South Africa people-to-people exchanges lies in cultural endowments, mutual learning and cultural integration. According to Junbo (2015), people-to-people cultural exchanges achieve a dual purpose: to enhance mutual cultural understanding and to lay a foundation for building sustainable relations.

China is proactive in advancing China–South Africa cultural exchanges. Since the launch of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, South Africa has consistently been a key participant, with this mechanism providing an institutionalized platform for people-to-people and educational exchanges (Procopio 2015; Wheeler 2013). The BRI, introduced in 2013, further expanded the cultural framework for China–South Africa cooperation, emphasizing the trinity of policy coordination, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges (Lan 2017; Chen and Duggan 2016; Zhu et al. 2024). In 2019, China and South Africa designated 17 September as South African Chinese Language Day (Anon. 2019). At the operational level, Confucius Institutes have become a vital medium for cultural and educational interaction between South Africa and China. Through language instruction, calligraphy exhibitions, youth summer camps and cultural festivals, these institutes not only deliver language training but also foster academic and youth exchanges (Procopio 2015; Wheeler 2013; Kimaiyo 2024), thus serving as bridges to connect the youth of both nations.

South Africa is also actively participating in its cultural exchanges with China. Its foreign policy has gradually shifted from a western orientation to an emphasis on the Global South and multilateralism, pursuing proactivity and agenda-setting power in its relations with China (Alden and Wu 2021). Approaches include ‘social exchanges and cooperation on poverty alleviation strategies; culture; women; youth; education; sport; health; the media; tourism; and other fields at the sub-national level to deepen mutual understanding and friendship, and to consolidate the social foundation of the bilateral relationship’ (Anon. 2023: n.pag.). Multiple South African universities have also established joint research and faculty exchange mechanisms with Chinese institutions, collaborating in fields such as engineering, medicine and the social sciences (Kabwete 2015).

In conclusion, the exchanges between China and South Africa have gradually extended from economic to cultural and educational dimensions. Through increasingly frequent cultural exchanges, both official and private, China and South Africa are laying a solid foundation for further deepening cultural cooperation, strengthening social cohesion and enhancing strategic mutual trust.

Aesthetic and cultural comparison

South Africa is celebrated as a multicultural society comprising multiple ethnic groups, including the Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaners and Khoisan, each with distinct cultural symbols and artistic traditions. From Indigenous rock art and township art to the works of contemporary artists such as William Kentridge, South Africa's cultural spectrum offers a rich material for comparison with Chinese traditions (Coombes 2003). Scholars highlight that artistic forms in both nations carry symbolic meanings beyond aesthetics, reflecting deeper collective or philosophical values (Kaschula 1993; Song and Fadaïro 2023).

Notable cultural value differences exist between China and South Africa. Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions indicate that strong collectivism, hierarchical social structures and a long-term planning orientation characterize China. By contrast, South Africa embodies the stronger individualist tendencies that are expressed through direct communication styles. Cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings during cross-cultural interactions. For example, Chinese culture places significant emphasis on *guanxi* (关系) ('relationships') and *mianzi* (面子) ('face'), reflecting collectivist norms, while South African contexts may favour individual agency and direct communication (Anedo 2012; Song 2022; Lynton and April 2012).

Aesthetically, Chinese artforms such as calligraphy and landscape painting emphasize abstraction, negative space and the unity of form and spirit. By contrast, South African art often foregrounds vivid visual expression, collective narratives and symbolic motifs that are rooted in historical struggles and spiritual beliefs (Kaschula 1993). South African audiences unfamiliar with the Confucian or Taoist concepts in traditional Chinese culture may therefore feel distanced when engaging with Chinese calligraphy. However, cultural differences do not completely isolate cultural exchanges. The Chinese and South African cultures can build a 'third space' through open cultural attitudes and shared aesthetic principles (Shi and Li 2023; Benyi 2017). The process of continuous mutual construction, driven by cultural integration and innovation, not only deepens bilateral understanding but also provides valuable insights for advancing broader South–South cooperation.

In addition, China and South Africa share similar cultural concepts. For example, Chinese and South African artistic traditions attach high value to symbolism: Chinese calligraphy embodies philosophical abstraction, discipline and cultivation, whereas South African sculpture and mural art convey collective memory and spiritual connection (Song and Fadaïro 2023; Kaschula 1993). Such symbolic significance creates opportunities for mutual understanding.

A REVIEW OF CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY RESEARCH

Essence and practice

Chinese calligraphy is a unique visual art form and a symbolic system deeply rooted in Chinese characters. Calligraphy is not a pure art form, but a 'hybrid' system: it is both an 'individual inscription', as suggested by Nelson Goodman (1968), possessing the syntactic articulation of literature due to its writing of linguistic characters, and, simultaneously, an 'artform', whose every ink trace, as an unrepeatable individual realization, makes it akin to painting (Ravasio et al. 2024). According to Ravasio et al., the appreciation of calligraphy requires us to attend simultaneously to the clear structure of its recognizable characters and strokes, and the dense visual texture of its ink shades, dryness and

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forceful impressions. From a semiotic perspective, calligraphy is not only a writing art but also a cultural symbolic system carrying rich historical, cultural and philosophical connotations, such as the concept of *qi* (气), which 'refers to the vital energy or life force that permeates all things' (Yang and Li 2023: 69) and which is treasured by Chinese calligraphy.

Building on an understanding of calligraphy's artistic and symbolic essence, its applied value has become increasingly prominent across various modern domains. With the creative inheritance and development of Chinese calligraphy, along with its wider international exchanges, its applied value has extended beyond Chinese traditional art to multiple fields, such as international education, psychological therapy and the cultural creative industries. In education, calligraphy teaching enhances students' ability to write Chinese characters, cultivating their aesthetic ability and qualities of concentration, patience and perseverance (Cao and Champadaeng 2024). In psychological therapy, Chu et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis indicates that Chinese calligraphy therapy can effectively alleviate anxiety, depression and psychotic symptoms while enhancing cognitive function. In the cultural creative industries, the application of calligraphic elements in product packaging design enhances the cultural value of products and promotes the international communication of traditional Chinese aesthetics (Zhang and Ghazali 2023). The innovative application of calligraphy in animation, film and public art further expands its expressive and communicative power as a cultural symbol (Liu 2023; Yang and Li 2023).

Chinese calligraphy and cross-cultural communication

As a core artform in Chinese culture, Chinese calligraphy plays a significant role in cross-cultural communication between China and other countries. The international communication of Chinese calligraphy has been conducted and studied primarily across three regions: (1) within the 'Chinese character cultural sphere', mainly in Japan and Korea; (2) European and American regions; and (3) countries along the Belt and Road Initiative path (Pan 2025). Cross-cultural calligraphy communication can be categorized into communication within and outside the Chinese character cultural sphere. Within the sphere, calligraphy communication exhibits cultural coherence with local traditions, whereas outside that sphere it may encounter cultural resistance (Zhu 2022). David Pan (2004) argues that learning a country's language enhances cultural affinity.

Empirical studies of Chinese calligraphy have confirmed differences in its reception, such as perception, cognition and aesthetic evaluation, across different regions and cultures (Xu and Shen 2023; Wu and Zahabi 2023). Xu and Shen (2023) employed the pleasure-interest model of aesthetic liking (the PIA model) and eye-tracking technology to find significant differences in the evaluation of five script styles among Chinese and non-Chinese participants, including those from Africa, North America and other Asian regions. Wu and Zahabi (2023) further point out that the influence of multicultural backgrounds on calligraphy cognition manifests on multiple levels, including cognitive patterns, aesthetic concepts and modes of artistic expression. The roots of these differences include psychological and emotional factors in the individual cognitive process, including emotional experiences and cultural expectations, and in the social environment, such as the shaping of individual aesthetic psychology by social aesthetic tastes.

Chinese calligraphy is exhibiting a trend towards diversification and deepening in regions with relatively little cultural difference from Chinese culture – particularly those that have historically been influenced by Chinese traditional culture. For example, Southeast Asian artists have integrated Chinese calligraphy with Indigenous cultural elements to create unique hybrid artworks (Pan 2025), demonstrating the active local engagement with and cultural adaptation of Chinese calligraphy. However, cultural differences have caused significant difficulties in Chinese calligraphy communication abroad, especially in the Global North (Zhu and Xiao 2025). Zhu and Xiao's article showcases some experts' perspectives on the challenges of internationalizing Chinese calligraphy: the general inability of Westerners to recognize Chinese characters and the lack of international exchange activities that appreciate calligraphy from a Chinese cultural perspective. Cultural exchange, including the international communication of Chinese calligraphy, should be bidirectional and inclusive, enriching global mutual understanding and promoting peace through the shared appreciation of masterpieces.

RESEARCH GAPS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Increasingly frequent economic exchanges have promoted relations between China and South Africa (Chivvis et al. 2023). However, existing discussions primarily revolve around the behaviours of state actors and economic dimensions. Meanwhile, scholarly research on cultural exchanges between China and South Africa emphasizes macro-level mechanisms and policy analysis (Junbo 2015). Academic research that focuses on South African perspectives, people-to-people exchanges and micro-level cultural dimensions is thus necessary. Using cultural symbols as a research medium is a practical approach. According to Liebes and Katz (1990), audiences from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same cultural product in varying ways. Kraidy (2002) explains this phenomenon as a conditioned reflex that is rooted in cultural identity. Analysing how South African audiences perceive Chinese symbols may help to promote intersubjectivity and mutual construction between China and South Africa, fostering inclusive cultural exchange.

Meanwhile, existing scholarship on Chinese calligraphy, including that from the Global North, neglects the perspectives from which Chinese calligraphy can reflect Chinese civilization and its humanistic ecology (Zhu and Xiao 2025). Compared with the Global North, research on Chinese calligraphy is even more scarce in the Global South. Some cultural exchange activities related to Chinese calligraphy exist in Africa, but there is a lack of sustained academic research or systematic communication strategies (Zhang 2008). Overall, while the quantity of Chinese calligraphy communication activities has increased, a need to improve the quality, cultural depth and systematic approaches remains, thus necessitating stronger integration of cross-cultural dialogue and localized strategies.

This study primarily addresses two research questions:

- RQ1** What are South Africans' aesthetic and cultural perceptions of Chinese calligraphy?
- RQ2** From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, what are the reasons for these perceptions?

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As can be seen from these questions, this study approaches Chinese calligraphy as a symbol of Chinese civilization and explores its communications in South Africa, focusing on South African perspectives, people-to-people exchanges and cultural dimensions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts Charles Sanders Peirce's (2014) semiotics as its theoretical framework, collecting data through online focus group interviews and in-depth interviews with South Africans. As discussed below, the framework is also relevant in coding analysis of the research data along three dimensions: aesthetic perceptions of South Africans, cultural perceptions of South Africans and a China–South Africa cultural comparison. Peirce's semiotics regards the meaning of a sign as being dynamically constructed by the interpreter, rather than as a one-way projection from the sender (Liszka 1996). Zhao's (2017) systematic exposition of Peirce's triadic communication model further refines this process: a sign comprises representamen, object and interpretant, with the interpretant continuously generating new signs during communication, thus forming an open 'chain of meaning'. Regarding the cross-cultural communication of Chinese calligraphy, Yu (2022) points out that the traditional one-way 'sender → sign → receiver' model is no longer sufficient to explain the reception of calligraphy in alien cultures, and advocates a shift to an 'interactive-subject' framework that, via contemporary transformation, seeks the 'common denominators' in Chinese and other countries' art to establish Habermasian 'communicative rationality'. To some extent, this study resonates with that shift.

The researchers conducted two focus group interviews with undergraduate students at the University of the Western Cape. The first group (G1) had no prior background in Chinese language learning, while the second group (G2) had all studied the Chinese language for some time. Each focus group interview consisted of eight students, all native South Africans. Participants in the focus group interviews ranged in age from 18 to 23 years, with the majority being female (see Table 1). Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, ensuring participant anonymity and informed consent. All participants signed informed consent forms before the interviews.

Each focus group interview lasted two hours and had a consistent structure that was divided into three parts:

- First, the researchers presented participants with the classic works from five Chinese calligraphy styles (Seal Script, Official Script, Regular Script, Running Script and Cursive Script). Each work represents three scales: micro, meso and macro. Participants shared their intuitive impressions of the works, based on their cultural background and prior knowledge, and ranked the five styles according to their aesthetic preferences.
- Second, the researchers explained the characteristics of the five styles, the context of the five works and the information regarding their appreciation of Chinese calligraphy.
- Lastly, participants re-ranked the five styles and their corresponding works, provided feedback based on the introduction to Chinese calligraphy and then discussed the similarities, differences and integration between Chinese and South African cultures.

Table 1: Information about participants in the G1 and G2 group interviews.

	No Chinese language learning background (G1)	With Chinese language learning background (G2)
Gender	Female (5); male (3)	Female (6); male (2)
Age	Range from 18 to 21 years old	Range from 19 to 23 years old
Education	Undergraduate (8)	Undergraduate (8)
Chinese language qualification (HSK 1–9)	N/A	HSK 2 (7); HSK 4 (1)

In-depth interviews with four professionals further enriched the discussion of the intersubjectivity between Chinese and South African cultures. The researchers employed a purposive sampling approach to capture diverse information. The interviewees included Dr Jaya Josie, an adjunct professor at the University of the Western Cape, who frequently travels between China and South Africa; John Bauer, a South African artist who has many artistic exchanges with Chinese people; an unnamed South African artist who is interested in Chinese culture; and an unnamed South African teacher at a Confucius Institute in South Africa. Topics covered in the in-depth interviews included their understanding and perceptions of Chinese calligraphy and culture, the similarities and differences between Chinese and South African cultures and the history, current state and challenges of cross-cultural communication between China and South Africa. The data were recorded and transcribed with permission from all participants.

The researchers coded the collected data according to three main categories: aesthetic evaluation, cultural cognition and comparison and cultural exchanges. The aesthetic evaluation section explored the South African participants’ affirmative and disconnective perceptions of Chinese calligraphy, the changes in their preferences before and after learning about Chinese calligraphy and how they intended to integrate South African cultural elements into Chinese calligraphy. The coding of cultural cognition and comparison was based on four dimensions: comprehensibility, emotional resonance, cultural resonance and cultural differences. The coding of cultural exchanges included the history, status, characteristics, challenges and future expectations regarding cultural exchanges between China and South Africa. Three coders cross-referenced all codes to verify validity and reliability.

FOUR-QUADRANT ANALYSIS: SOUTH AFRICAN PARTICIPANTS’ AESTHETIC PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

The South African participants’ perceptions of Chinese calligraphy reveal a dynamic process of semiotic interpretation, influenced by their Chinese-language background, knowledge of Chinese calligraphy and cross-cultural interactions. This study employs Peirce’s semiotic theory, particularly the triadic theory of signs and sign communication. It examines the relationships among the calligraphic works as representamen, their cultural context as object and the participants’ perceptions and interactions as interpretant, which plays a decisive role in this triadic mode (Zhao 2017). Moreover, it analyses three interpretant types in the communication process: *intentional interpretant* (sender-generated), *effectual interpretant* (receiver-generated) and

cominterpretant (mutually constructed). This framework challenges unidirectional meaning transmission, emphasizing dialogic negotiation towards a shared understanding between the sender and the receiver.

This research explores how South African participants perceived and decoded the five scripts of Chinese calligraphy and their representative works, as follows.

- A (Seal Script) (篆书): Mount Tai Stele (泰山刻石)
- B (Official Script) (隶书): Zhang Qian Stele (张迁碑)
- C (Regular Script) (楷书): Yan Qinli Stele (颜勤礼碑)
- D (Running Script) (行书): Orchid Pavilion Preface (兰亭序)
- E (Cursive Script) (草书): Calligraphy on Autobiographical Notes (自叙帖)

1. Calculation method for the data in Tables 1–5: option average composite score = (Σ frequency × weight)/number of respondents for this question. The weight is determined by the position in which the option is ranked.

Figure 1 shows that data from the two focus group interviews are categorized into four quadrants based on two groups with different Chinese language learning backgrounds (G1 and G2) and two rounds that took place before and after introducing the information on the appreciating Chinese calligraphy and the features of the five scripts, as well as explaining the five calligraphic works (R1 and R2). Researchers showed participants the five calligraphic works and asked them to rank them from 1 to 5 in the two rounds, based on their aesthetic preferences. The results of the statistical analysis are presented in Tables 2–5.¹

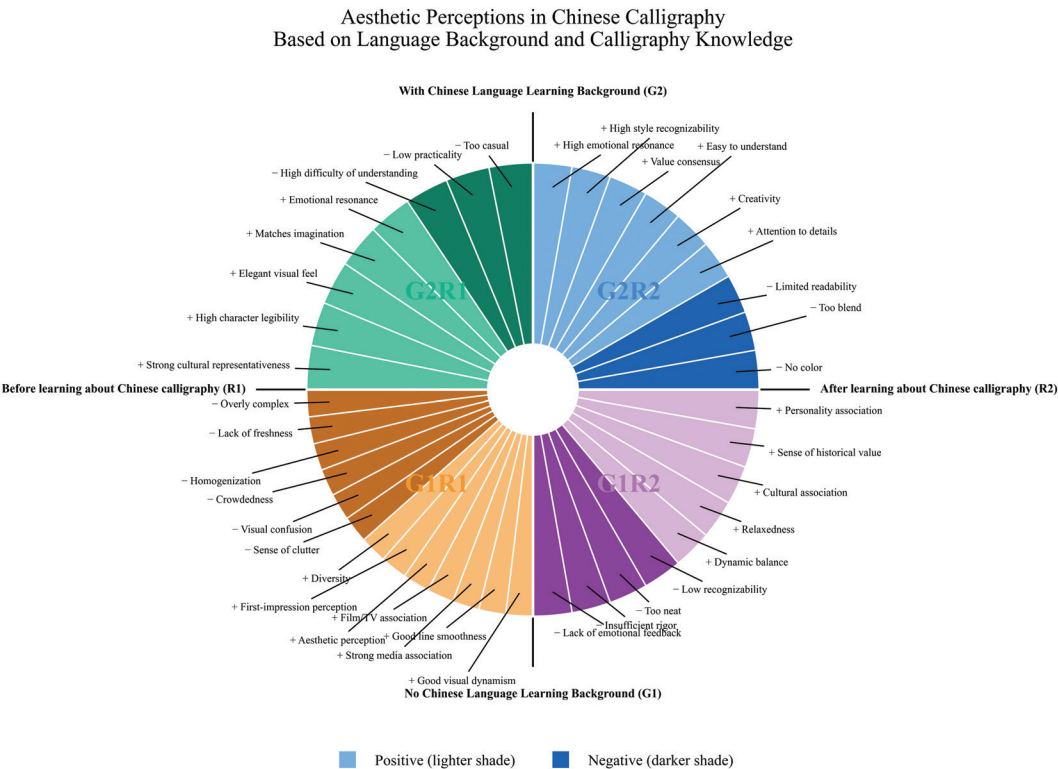


Figure 1: Aesthetic perceptions in Chinese calligraphy based on language background and calligraphic knowledge.

Table 2: Aesthetic evaluation form for Chinese calligraphic works: first group, first round.

Chinese calli-graphic works	Comprehensive score	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5	No. of times
D	3.38	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	8
B	3.38	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	8
C	3.25	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	8
E	3	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	8
A	2	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	5 (62.5%)	2 (25%)	8

Table 3: Aesthetic evaluation form for Chinese calligraphic works: first group, second round.

Chinese calli-graphic works	Comprehensive score	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5	No. of times
C	3.63	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	8
D	3.25	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	0 (0%)	8
B	3.13	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	8
A	2.88	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	8
E	2.13	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	8

Table 4: Aesthetic evaluation form for Chinese calligraphic works: second group, first round.

Chinese calli-graphic works	Comprehensive score	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5	No. of times
D	4	5 (62.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	8
C	3.88	1 (12.5%)	5 (62.5%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8
B	3.25	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	8
A	2.63	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0%)	8
E	1.25	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	7 (87.5%)	8

Table 5: Aesthetic evaluation form for Chinese calligraphic works: second group, second round.

Chinese calli-graphic works	Comprehensive score	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5	No. of times
D	4.38	5 (62.5%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	8
C	3.5	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8
A	2.88	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	8
B	2.75	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	8
E	1.5	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	5 (62.5%)	8

Quadrant G1R1: No Chinese learning background and before learning about Chinese calligraphy

In the G1R1 quadrant, D and B received the highest comprehensive score (3.38), while A scored lowest (2.00) (see Table 2). Lacking the cultural context,

their interpretants were predominantly immediate interpretants, formed through perceptual engagement with visual form. The flowing strokes of running script and wavy lines of official script were indexically associated with movement, fluidity and freedom, and were further reinforced by their prior knowledge of Chinese culture, such as Chinese dramas:

I like B, because some of the characters look like it's flowing.²
I have watched many TV dramas about Chinese emperors and the calligraphy appearing in them is very similar to D.³

By contrast, the complex structure of seal script was perceived to be 'disordered' and 'complicated', and it was suggested that it 'must take a lot of time to write'.⁴

The interpretive process is stunted if there is no access to the cultural and historical background of the object. The sender is the intentional interpretant, but the receiver's effectual interpretant remains disconnected, thus preventing the formation of a cominterpretant.

Quadrant G1R2: No Chinese learning background and after learning about Chinese calligraphy

Following the introduction to Chinese calligraphy, their aesthetic preferences shifted significantly, with C attaining the highest score (3.63) (see Table 3). The information of calligraphy's history and aesthetic principles enriched the participants' understanding of the object, facilitating a transition from immediate interpretants to dynamic interpretants (deeper semiotic engagement). One participant noted: 'My ranking changed from D to C, because C was written by an upright person (Yan Zhenqing) and the characters look like they coincide with his personality'.⁵ This comment signifies a move beyond pure visual perception towards an appreciation of the cultural value embodied in the script or work. Another participant related seal script to 'our ancestors' rock paintings – both use simple lines to record stories'.⁶ This connection shows that the participant actively aligned their personal perceptual experience and prior knowledge (effectual interpretant) with the history of seal script (object), thus laying the foundation for the formation of a cominterpretant.

Quadrant G2R1: With Chinese learning background and before learning about Chinese calligraphy

Participants in G2, who are learning Chinese, exhibited a different preference from those in G1. Table 4 shows that D received the highest comprehensive score (4.0), thus reflecting its alignment with preconceived imagery of Chinese calligraphy: 'I feel D just looks like what I considered Chinese calligraphy would be'.⁷ Work C was also valued for its legibility: 'I think that C is the most comprehensible. You can clearly see the meaning'.⁸ Participants' interpretants were already dynamic, facilitated by their Chinese language proficiency and prior cultural background, which provided a framework for engaging with the object. These comments support the view that interpretants are mediated by cultural and experiential background (Zhao 2017). However, this predisposition also reinforced a preference for decipherability, which resulted in the strong rejection of E with a score 1.25, which was over half as low as G1R1's three points, as it was described as 'difficult to understand the meaning of it'.⁹ The intentional interpretant of E conflicted with

2. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
3. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
4. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
5. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
6. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
7. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
8. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
9. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.

- 10. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
- 11. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
- 12. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.

participants’ expectational effectual interpretant, which prioritized aesthetic clarity and semantic access.

Quadrant G2R2: With Chinese learning background and after learning about Chinese calligraphy

In Quadrant G2R2, D remained the most preferred one (score 4.38) (see Table 5). The most notable change was the nuanced shift in perception towards E. Although still the lowest rated (1.5), participants approached it with greater conceptual understanding: ‘After understanding the story about E, I think it is not that bad. The calligrapher was expressing himself’.¹⁰ Another noted: ‘I felt it looked chaotic, but now I think it’s just this kind of style’.¹¹ Context relating to artistic emotion and personality facilitated the acceptance of the intentional interpretant. A significant cross-cultural association showed in the words of one participant: ‘I think our art is like E – it’s not about perfection but about expressing what you feel’.¹² These comments reflect the formation of a cominterpretant, integrating the intentional interpretant of cursive script with the interpreter’s artistic values, thus demonstrating a successful cross-cultural meaning negotiation through communication.

FOUR-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS: SOUTH AFRICAN LEARNERS’ CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

Building upon the macroscopic patterns of aesthetic preference revealed by the four-quadrant analysis, this section delves into the underlying cultural-cognitive and affective mechanisms governing Chinese calligraphy’s cross-cultural interpretation. While the quadrants demonstrated the outcome of semiotic processing – showing how preferences shift with cultural knowledge – this analysis employs a four-dimensional framework to analyse the process, examining why these signs generate specific interpretants in South African participants.

These dimensions represent a logical progression in Peirce’s semiotic theory. They correspond to the stages through which a representamen is engaged: from its initial perceptibility and legibility (comprehensibility) to its affective impact (emotional resonance), its capacity to connect with pre-existing cultural schemas (cultural resonance) and its potential to reveal divergent cultures and aesthetic values (cultural differences). This framework enables us to move beyond what was preferred, allowing us to precisely deconstruct how the interplay between visual signs, the cultural object and the interpreter’s background collaboratively constructs meaning, ultimately facilitating or hindering the formation of a cominterpretant.

Dimension of comprehensibility

Comprehensibility is the audience’s most immediate catalyst or barrier, influencing their ability and interest in engaging with the works. Table 6 shows that scripts perceived as clear and legible, such as C and D, were evaluated as more affirmative. As one student stated: ‘I think that C is the most comprehensible. You can clearly see the meaning of the word itself’.¹³ Conversely, the inability to comprehend E and A led to frustration or rejection: ‘It’s difficult to understand the meaning of E [...] It just looks like squiggles’.¹⁴ Dr Jaya Josie also initially interpreted works based on visual clarity and perceived purpose, guessing the B work *Zhang Qian Stele* might be ‘an important document or an

Table 6: Cultural perception of Chinese calligraphy from the dimension of comprehensibility.

Chinese calligraphic works	Examples of interview data
A	‘A looks very complicated and you have to learn how to read it, which would be very difficult to learn’.
B	‘I like B because it’s fairly neat like a government regulation that may be easy to recognize the meanings’.
C	‘I think that C is the most comprehensible. You can clearly see the meaning of the word itself’.
D	‘I think why we like D is because it’s not only comprehensible, but also it is elegant’.
E	‘It’s difficult to understand the meaning of it (E)’.

important rule or something’ because, historically, ‘anything written clearly on rock, stone and tablets is a law or the rule’.¹⁵ This highlights how comprehensibility, or the lack of it, shapes the initial *interpretant*, anchoring it in practical function rather than artistic merit.

Dimension of emotional resonance

Emotional reactions varied significantly depending on the script and the participant’s background. E provoked the strongest and most polarized responses (see Table 7). Adverse reactions stemmed from its illegibility: ‘It’s like a drunk person writing’.¹⁶ Affirmative reactions emerged after understanding its context, enabling an appreciation of its intense expressiveness: ‘I can definitely tell there is some emotion behind it, and it’s quite free flowing as well, just like the writing’.¹⁷ Jaya Josie’s reaction to the calligraphic work E evolved upon explanation. Initially confused, he later understood and interpreted that ‘I can feel he was very proud of his mastery of calligraphy’.¹⁸ This shows how emotion is often tied to the perceived *object* (the artist’s intent) rather than to the *representamen*, and accessing that intent requires cultural or contextual knowledge.

Dimension of cultural resonance

Cultural resonance describes the active process through which the participants established meaningful correspondences between the representamen and their own cultural experiences, mediating between the Chinese cultural *object* and their South African frames of reference. This negotiation operated through two distinct channels (see Table 8). First, historical connection involved indexical linkages between ancient Chinese scripts and South African historical artforms. For instance, one participant connected A to rock paintings, noting that: ‘It makes me think of our rock paintings’,¹⁹ effectively aligning the Chinese cultural object with a local sign. Second, media exposure provided a framework for symbolic association, within which recurring representations in popular culture shaped perceptions of Chinese calligraphy. One participant stated: ‘Aesthetic appeal, my favorite was D, because when you watch Chinese dramas and then they write Chinese characters [they are] mostly like that. It’s very beautiful’.²⁰ D functioned as an iconic representamen

- 13. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
- 14. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
- 15. Interview with Dr Jaya Josie by the authors on 21 March 2025.
- 16. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
- 17. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
- 18. Interview with Dr Jaya Josie by the authors on 21 March 2025.
- 19. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
- 20. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.

Table 7: Cultural perception of Chinese calligraphy from the dimension of emotional resonance.

Chinese calligraphic works	Examples of interview data
A	‘For A, I understand it is creative and the calligrapher was forming something new. But, there wasn’t like any characters or any form of communication’.
B	‘B looks too solemn so it didn’t stand out to me’.
C	‘I didn’t like C because it’s too neat, too balanced. It doesn’t strike me like B’s flowing sense. The characters are a little bit too straight’.
D	‘I like D because it looks so interesting. And if you look at it, it’s almost showing movements and interacting with you’.
E	‘I can definitely tell there is some emotion behind it. And it’s quite free flowing as well, just like the writing’.

Table 8: Cultural perception of Chinese calligraphy from the dimension of cultural resonance.

Chinese calligraphic works	Examples of interview data
A	‘And then for cultural resonance, I chose A because the characters look like pictures. And with South Africa, we also used to draw on the walls and what we drew was like pictures’.
B	‘Like the B work shows the aesthetic features of sincerity and strength, we also pursue it. You can see that through South African arts. It is depicted in their art’.
C	‘When I was learning about the balance of strength and elegance showed in C, I am reminded of in South Africa, when they paint people with their traditional clothing would symbolize elegance and strength. We actually have the statue where a woman is carrying a bucket or something which shows her strength and elegance. This is part of our culture’.
D	‘Aesthetic appeal my favorite was D because when you watch Chinese dramas and then they write Chinese characters mostly like that. It’s very beautiful’.
E	‘There is a popular music genre “amapiano”. It usually has no structure with free style, which looks like E’.

21. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.

of Chinese culture and its mediated repetition naturalized its aesthetic value. This pursuit of resonance reflects a deliberate semiotic strategy to construct a cominterpretant – a shared meaning where the intentional interpretant of the source culture and the effectual interpretant of the receiving culture converge through cultural resonances.

Dimension of cultural differences

Participants identified stylistic differences between Chinese calligraphic aesthetics and their own cultural artforms (see Table 9). The key differences noted were: (1) Multi-colour vs. monochrome: ‘We love colours [...] this [Chinese calligraphy] is just black and white’.²¹ Participants suggested incorporating colours to enhance appeal. (2) Structured order vs. spontaneous expression: some participants perceived C to be too rigid: ‘It’s too neat

Table 9: Cultural perception of Chinese calligraphy from the dimension of cultural differences.

Chinese calli-graphic works	Examples of interview data
A	‘For South African art, you have to express emotion through art. So if there’s balance, order and structure like A, it just seems as very hard. For African drawings, it’s seldom symmetrical. It shows emotion. It’s more the emotional side than it is about structure’.
B	‘For South African arts, it’s not about simplicity like B pursues [...] because most of the time we choose the diversity of the cultures of South Africa. The art usually vibrant and very colourful’.
C	‘C looks too neat and clean from aesthetical appeal. Also the colours, we love colours, but that colour is just black and white’.
D	–
E	‘I noticed there are blanks or spaces on E and I knew it called <i>Liu Bai</i> which means leaving some spaces on the page to make it look better. In South Africa, we don’t pay much attention on the space but the content of drawing or painting is more important. You can see many visual arts in South Africa which is no space and it’s usually full’.

and clean from aesthetic appeal’.²² They contrasted this with the value placed on emotion and expression in South African art. (3) The concept of space: A participant noted the difference in the use of blank space:

I noticed there are blanks or spaces on E, and I knew it was called *Liu Bai*, which means leaving some spaces on the page to make it look better. In South Africa, we don’t pay much attention to the space, but the content of drawing or painting is more important.²³

These perceived differences highlight the distinct semiotic habits of each culture, influencing what aspects of the representamen are prioritized in interpretation.

Synthesized through Peirce’s framework, the analysis illustrates the dynamic formation of the interpretant. This process originates from the immediate interpretant, driven by a perceptual response, such as the description of ‘this looks messy’ for E.²⁴ Through the introduction of context with the object, in its complete sense, it then evolves into a more refined dynamic interpretant, such as ‘this messy style expresses intense emotion’.²⁵ The ideal outcome is a cominterpretant that appreciates the works within its appropriate cultural and aesthetic framework, which is based on both cultural backgrounds. This process is not inevitable, but rather requires active negotiation among the representamen, the object and the interpreters’ cultural backgrounds.

CHINA–SOUTH AFRICA CULTURAL COMPARISON: COMMONALITIES, DIFFERENCES AND INTEGRATION

The divergent interpretative paths to Chinese calligraphy that are revealed above are rooted in the more profound similarities and differences between the Chinese and South African cultural systems. This section shifts the analytical

22. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.

23. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.

24. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.

25. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.

26. Interview with a South African artist by the authors on 26 March 2025.
27. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
28. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
29. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.

focus from the micro-perspective of Chinese calligraphy to the macro-level of the arts and cultures of the two countries.

Cultural commonalities: Philosophical foundations and shared human experiences

China and South Africa demonstrate profound philosophical parallels that extend beyond calligraphy to encompass fundamental similarities in worldviews. Both traditions emphasize community, reciprocity and emotional expression. The South African philosophy of *Ubuntu* ('I am because we are') echoes the Chinese concept of *Ren Ai* ('benevolence'), with both concepts stressing mutual care and collective well-being (Junbo 2015). The two philosophical frameworks create what Peirce would have identified as a shared interpretative mode – the typical cultural pattern predisposing individuals from both cultures to value community and collective well-being. One participant articulated this connection: 'In both our cultures, the community comes first. We see this in how our art forms develop – always speaking to shared experiences rather than just individual expression'.²⁶ This fundamental alignment in worldviews provides the semiotic foundation for cross-cultural understanding, enabling what might be termed cultural empathy – the ability to recognize familiar human values despite different cultural expressions.

The historical connection through pictographic expression provides another crucial semiotic connection between the two countries. One participant observed that 'Chinese characters look like pictures. In South Africa, we also used to draw on walls'.²⁷ The shared heritage of visual communication has enabled the participants to access ancient scripts, such as seal script, through indexical connections to their cultural heritage. Several participants specifically linked these ancient scripts to South African rock paintings: 'It makes me think of our rock paintings'.²⁸ These connections illustrate what Peirce termed indexical signs – where the Chinese character serves as an index pointing to a shared human experience with visual communication, thus facilitating the translation of cultural objects across divergent traditions.

Cultural differences: Aesthetic values and communication paradigms

The analysis of cultural differences reveals significant semiotic friction points that have necessitated active negotiation between the Chinese *intentional interpretant* and the South African *effectual interpretant*. South African artistic traditions generally emphasize polychromatic and spontaneous expression, values that permeate everything from traditional crafts to contemporary visual arts; this contrasts sharply with Chinese culture's historical valuing of monochromatic refinement and structured expression, which are evident across various artforms. As one participant with an art background articulated: 'Your ink wash paintings and our street murals show this difference clearly – yours find depth in minimalism, ours in vibrant patterns and colours'.²⁹ These differences represent the culturally specific ways of creating and interpreting signs that operate at the most fundamental level of cultural expression.

Furthermore, the communication paradigms differ equally profoundly, which affects the ways in which knowledge and meaning are transmitted within each culture. China's long history of written culture has developed a text-centred methodology in which knowledge is preserved through written

characters and formal systems. By contrast, South Africa’s strong oral traditions have fostered an oracy-centred methodology that values verbal artistry and performative transmission. As a participant explained: ‘The way we express ourselves is different. Chinese people express themselves through writing a lot, by everything that involves ink, brush and paper, like calligraphy, paintings and poems. However, South Africans express ourselves through saying, dancing and singing’.³⁰ This fundamental difference in communication approaches creates alternative routes by which meaning is created, shared and inherited within each culture. As the South African artist John Bauer pointed out, the differences in cultural inheritance are: ‘Chinese art focuses on inheriting proven exquisite craftsmanship and carries on traditions passed down from generation to generation. South African culture, on the other hand, seeks unity in diversity and creativity’.³¹

30. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.

31. Interview with the South African artist John Bauer by the authors on 2 April 2025.

Cultural integration: Constructing a cominterpretant through cross-cultural interactions

The significant finding emerges from participants’ active attempts to integrate cultural differences through what Peirce termed the formation of the cominterpretant, which means the shared understanding that emerges when different cultural perspectives negotiate meaning through the sign. When faced with cultural divergences, South African participants proposed modifications,

Table 10: A re-creation evaluation of the five Chinese calligraphic works.

Group	First-level label	Second-level label	Chinese calligraphy works	Specific corpus
G1	Visual effect improvement	Colour matching suggestions	B	‘The calm, water-resembling essence of blue is what I favour; when incorporated, it enables the calligraphy to emerge prominently from the black-and-white base’.
G1	Visual effect improvement	Colour matching suggestions	All	‘I think if we incorporate different colours it will make it more appealing’.
G1	Visual effect improvement	Colour and shape matching suggestions	All	‘I think Chinese characters can be written in a more pictographic way. For instance, if a character means water or the ocean, it can be written in blue and resemble the ripples of water’.
G2	Visual effect improvement	Add details	E	‘I think it may be improved by using more details like a lot of African artists may be characterized by lots of intricate details. So maybe by spicing it up a little bit’.
G2	Textual comprehension assistance	Adjust the number of characters	E	‘So maybe that we’ll reduce the number of characters that look very similar, because it does look like a signature. So if it reduced the number of characters that look similar and made them a bit more differently by adding a line like this it could look more neat’.

32. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
33. This opinion is from a student in Group 1 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 6 March 2025.
34. Interview with the South African artist John Bauer by the authors on 2 April 2025.
35. This opinion is from a student in Group 2 at the University of the Western Cape. Interview by the authors, 7 March 2025.
36. Interview with a teacher at a Confucius Institute in South Africa by the authors on 10 April 2025.
37. Interview with the South African artist John Bauer by the authors on 2 April 2025.

mixing and re-creation to make Chinese calligraphy more accessible in their own cultural framework (see Table 10). These proposals represent the dynamic process of unlimited semiosis in action, a process in which initial interpretants become new signs as part of an ongoing meaning-making process.

Participants suggested various strategies for achieving this semiotic integration. Some proposed incorporating colour into the monochromatic tradition: 'Blue is like water – it makes people calm. Colouring the characters blue can make it stand out from black and white'.³² This represents an attempt to create what Peirce would call a hybrid sign – blending Chinese calligraphic forms with South African colour symbolism. Others recommended adding visual narratives to enhance comprehensibility: 'If you put pictures next to the words to make people understand it better. Like the character means ocean, you can have an ocean background'.³³ John Bauer emphasizes that his artistic practice intentionally incorporates elements from various cultures, including Chinese coins and silver bars, to create art that is 'inclusive to create a cultural resonance'.³⁴ These proposals demonstrate active semiotic work to create what Peirce termed 'thirdness' – a mediating principle that reconciles different cultural perspectives.

Cross-cultural integration occurs when people identify underlying general values that transcend specific cultural forms. As the participant noted: 'I think our art is like E – it's not about perfection but about expressing what you feel'.³⁵ This reflects the formation of a cominterpretant, merging the Chinese emphasis on conveying spirit through art with the South African value of emotional authenticity. Through this process, meaning was actively co-created, rather than passively received, thus achieving the goal of cross-cultural semiosis – generating new understanding that enriches both perspectives while preserving their distinct characteristics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study's two focus group interviews confirmed the important role of people-to-people exchanges in communicating Chinese culture and calligraphy in South Africa. The research found that South African participants had misunderstandings and confusion about the expression of Chinese calligraphy. For example, some initially had the intuitive impression of cursive script as a casual doodle. After learning about Chinese calligraphy, some participants experienced changes in their aesthetic and cognitive evaluations of Chinese calligraphic works. Meanwhile, South African participants also expressed a strong interest in Chinese calligraphy. They explored using South African cultural symbols, such as colour, to modify, integrate and recreate Chinese calligraphy. In fact, South Africa's cultural atmosphere is conducive to the cultural exchanges between the two countries: 'South Africa is a multi-ethnic, multicultural country with a strong sense of inclusiveness, which makes its culture highly inclusive, so people are willing to learn about Chinese culture'.³⁶

As the Rainbow Nation, South African culture can embrace many cultures, including the Chinese culture. However, a prerequisite is that South Africans can encounter and understand Chinese culture. John Bauer concluded that promoting cultural exchanges between China and South Africa requires creating more space for dialogue.³⁷

This research employs Pierce's semiotics as a theoretical framework within which to analyse the aesthetic and cultural perceptions of South African participants towards Chinese calligraphy, as well as the reasons behind these

perceptions from a cross-cultural perspective. However, one limitation of this research was the amount of data involved. This research conducted two focus group interviews (sixteen participants) and four in-depth interviews. To some extent, the selection of purposeful samples has compensated for the lack of generalizable data. However, the lack of a large data sample restricts more detailed coding. For example, South Africa is a multi-ethnic country and its various ethnic groups may have different aesthetics and evaluations of Chinese calligraphy. Therefore, subsequent experiments could further refine the identities of the participants, thus providing a more micro-level explanation of the cultural similarities and differences between China and South Africa.

In conclusion, considering the frequency and scale of economic exchanges, cultural exchanges between China and South Africa – particularly people-to-people interactions – still hold significant potential for growth. This study offers fresh insight into intersubjective cultural appreciation between the two countries. First, by focusing on culture rather than economics, it highlights opportunities for comprehensive multilateralism and multicultural development within the BRICS framework. Second, it foregrounds the perspectives of South African participants, analysing their engagement with Chinese culture as a process of multi-directional, intersubjective mutual construction, rather than as a one-way subject-object transmission. Third, it moves beyond the boundaries of state actors to emphasize the importance of people-to-people cultural exchanges. The South African participants' reflections on Chinese calligraphy illustrate rich potential for reciprocal cultural exchange. As such exchanges deepen, Chinese culture may increasingly blend with South African traditions, evolving into new forms of cultural expression within South Africa.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article was researched to the standards of the University of Westminster's Code of Practice Governing the Ethical Conduct of Research: <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/sites/default/public-files/general-documents/Ethics-Code-Of-Practice.pdf>. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, ensuring participant anonymity and informed consent. All participants signed informed consent forms before the interviews.

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Yisai Wang is the first author of this article; Yang Zhengguoguo is the co-first author of this article; Xuda Wang is the corresponding author of this article; Changhong Wu is the second author of this article; Subethra Pather is the co-second author of this article; Yuhan Yuan is the third author of this article.

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