

Mapping Knowledge Production and Disciplinary Formation in Higher Calligraphy Education in East Asia: A Comparative Study of Graduate Theses at Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University.

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Abstract

This study examines how knowledge is produced and organized in higher calligraphy education in East Asia through a comparative analysis of graduate theses from Beijing Language and Culture University in China and Kyonggi University in Korea. Drawing on a dataset of 64 master's and doctoral theses, the study classifies thesis topics into four categories: calligraphy theory, historical studies of calligraphy, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary and innovative research. Using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis, it identifies both shared tendencies and institutional differences in the disciplinary structure of calligraphy studies.

The findings show that both universities are strongly oriented toward historical studies of calligraphy, while theoretical inquiry, calligraphy education, and seal engraving-related research remain comparatively underrepresented. At the same time, Kyonggi University demonstrates a markedly higher proportion of interdisciplinary and innovative research than Beijing Language and Culture University, suggesting that curricular design, institutional organization, and supervisory orientations influence the distribution of thesis topics. These results indicate that higher calligraphy education in both China and Korea remains shaped by a history-centered epistemological structure, even as some institutional contexts display signs of interdisciplinary expansion.

Beyond documenting topic distribution, this study argues that graduate theses provide a useful empirical lens for understanding disciplinary formation in East Asian arts and humanities education. It contributes to broader discussions of non-Western knowledge systems, the institutionalization of traditional art forms, and the changing configuration of humanities-based arts research in contemporary higher education...

Keywords: higher calligraphy education; disciplinary formation; knowledge production; graduate theses; East Asian arts and humanities; interdisciplinary research

INTRODUCTION

Higher calligraphy education operates at the intersection of two parallel imperatives: the transmission of a traditional art form and the construction of a modern academic discipline. Historically, calligraphy has embodied a composite cultural practice encompassing textual culture, aesthetics, artistic expression, and humanistic cultivation. Within contemporary university systems, however, it is no longer confined to the transmission of technical skills; rather, it is increasingly required to establish its own disciplinary identity and methodological foundation as an autonomous field of study. In recent years, higher calligraphy education across East Asia has entered a new phase of transformation, shaped by the expansion of academic programs, the massification of higher education, the deepening of international collaboration, and the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary integration in the arts (Mok, Ke, & Tian, 2023; Postiglione, 2019; Wang, 2026; Ban, 2024). These developments not only suggest the possibility of repositioning calligraphy as a key component of contemporary humanities and arts research, but also highlight challenges related to maintaining disciplinary balance and defining research directions within processes of internationalization and institutionalization (Xu, 2021; Wang & Liu, 2014).

In this context, graduate theses constitute an important empirical source for understanding the current state of higher calligraphy education. As primary research outputs generated within graduate training systems, theses reflect, in a condensed manner, the academic interests, methodological orientations, educational priorities, and institutional structures of a given period. Analyzing the distribution of thesis topics, therefore, goes beyond identifying thematic tendencies; it reveals which areas are prioritized and which are relatively marginalized within higher calligraphy education. Quantitative and comparative examinations of graduate theses can thus illuminate structural patterns and disciplinary biases, offering valuable insights for future academic development.

Based on this perspective, the present study selects Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University as comparative cases. Both institutions, as comprehensive universities, have established relatively complete calligraphy education systems encompassing undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels, and they integrate theoretical research, artistic practice, and international exchange. These shared characteristics make them highly comparable. At the same time, each institution represents a distinctive model through which higher calligraphy education is institutionalized and academically organized in China and Korea, respectively. A comparative analysis of their graduate theses therefore provides an effective framework for examining not only institutional specificities, but also broader commonalities and differences in higher calligraphy education across the two countries, as well as the structural features of calligraphy as an academic discipline in East Asia.

Previous research in calligraphy studies has largely focused on individual calligraphers, historical developments, theoretical writings, aesthetics, and formal analysis of works, resulting in a substantial accumulation of case-based scholarship. However, relatively few studies have examined graduate theses—the primary outputs of higher education—from a quantitative and comparative perspective, particularly in terms of topic distribution and research structure. Comparative investigations of graduate theses between Chinese and Korean universities, aimed at simultaneously identifying structural biases, shared academic tendencies, and institutional differences, remain limited. In this regard, the present study seeks to move beyond the interpretation of individual works and instead analyze graduate theses as a collective dataset through which the structural characteristics of higher calligraphy education can be discerned.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What similarities and differences can be observed in the distribution of thesis topics between the two institutions?

RQ2: How are these distributions related to the academic structures of higher calligraphy education in China and Korea?

RQ3: What developmental potential exists for relatively underrepresented areas, such as seal studies, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary research?

In response to these questions, the primary aim of this study is to comparatively analyze the topic distribution and research tendencies of master's and doctoral theses in calligraphy at Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University, and to interpret their relationships with underlying academic traditions, institutional frameworks, and supervisory systems. To achieve this, the study first identifies and quantitatively categorizes the thematic distribution of theses at both institutions. Second, it examines how these distributions correspond to structural characteristics shared within Chinese and Korean higher calligraphy education. Third, it explores the academic potential and future directions of relatively underrepresented areas, including seal studies, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary research.

Furthermore, this study adopts an analytical framework that interprets thesis topic distributions across three interrelated dimensions: academic tradition, institutional structure (at the university and departmental levels), and the advisor–student relationship. Rather than focusing solely on textual interpretation, it employs a quantitative and comparative approach to institutionalized research outputs—graduate theses—in order to visualize research priorities and disciplinary structures within higher calligraphy education. This approach represents a methodological attempt to empirically uncover implicit biases within calligraphy studies and demonstrates that thesis analysis can serve as an effective framework for examining the structure of knowledge production in arts-based higher education.

Ultimately, through a comparative analysis of the two institutions, this study aims to explore how calligraphy as a discipline is being transformed within the broader context of the East Asian sinographic cultural sphere, and how it may further develop in terms of theoretical articulation, pedagogical integration, and interdisciplinary expansion. In doing so, it seeks to provide a foundational reference for the future development of higher calligraphy education and calligraphy studies in both China and Korea.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Prior to conducting a quantitative analysis of graduate theses—the primary outputs of higher calligraphy education in China and Korea—this study first reviews the existing trajectories and limitations of calligraphy scholarship and establishes an analytical framework grounded in methodological discussions from comparative education and comparative higher education research. In comparative education, comparison is not understood as a simple juxtaposition of parallel cases, but rather as a process of interpreting the historical, institutional, and contextual conditions under which the objects of comparison have been formed. Phillips (2006) emphasizes that the core of comparative education lies in the contextualization and interpretation of comparative cases. This perspective suggests that the present study should not be limited to describing differences between Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University, but should also interpret the academic and institutional conditions that have produced such differences.

2.1 Historical Bias and Theoretical Imbalance in Calligraphy Studies

Existing scholarship in calligraphy has traditionally placed greater emphasis on philological verification and historical research, and this imbalance has been repeatedly noted in recent studies. Analyses of doctoral dissertations in calligraphy in China, for instance, indicate that research on calligraphy history occupies the largest proportion, whereas studies on calligraphy theory, calligraphy education, creative practice, and applied research remain relatively limited. This pattern suggests that while historically oriented accumulation within the field remains robust, corresponding developments in theoretical articulation and pedagogical systematization have not progressed to the same extent.

In this regard, graduate theses can be understood as a condensed indicator of what higher calligraphy education considers to be its core research problems at a given time, as well as how knowledge is organized through specific methods and thematic categories. Critiques of this imbalance have generally developed along two lines. One concerns the increasing dominance of historical research over theoretical inquiry within calligraphy studies, leading to a relative contraction of discussions in aesthetics, criticism, and art history. The other highlights the excessive concentration on classical texts and individual cases, which limits the field's ability to engage with contemporary transformations in calligraphy and to establish theoretical dialogue with other disciplines. Recent developments in arts and education research further emphasize the need for multi-layered interpretation and methodological reconsideration tailored to the nature of research data, rather than reliance on a single traditional approach. In this sense, calligraphy studies are likewise called upon to pursue not only the inheritance of tradition but also theoretical and methodological reconstruction (Morris et al., 2022).

2.2 Contextualization and Multi-level Comparison in Comparative Methodology

This study adopts a comparative approach that goes beyond simple juxtaposition of graduate theses from Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University by incorporating multiple levels of analysis and contextual considerations. Comparative higher education research has shown that national-level differences alone are insufficient to explain the structure of research production; instead, institutional characteristics, curricula, levels of internationalization, research environments, and relationships among actors interact in complex ways. Hauptman Komotar (2022) argues that comparative research in a globalized higher education context operates within the tension between convergence and diversity, and that contextual factors must be integrated into the analytical framework.

This perspective supports the premise that differences in higher calligraphy education between China and Korea should not be reduced to national contrasts alone, but should be understood within a structural context where academic traditions, institutional arrangements, and supervisory systems intersect. Such a multi-level approach is particularly relevant to calligraphy studies. Even within the shared category of “higher calligraphy education,” China and Korea may exhibit distinct characteristics in terms of academic traditions, curricular organization, research support systems, levels of international exchange, and the nature of advisor–student relationships. Consequently, the distribution of thesis topics should not be viewed merely as an outcome of individual students' interests, but as the result of overlapping influences from national academic traditions, institutional conditions, and interactions within research environments.

Inouye and McAlpine (2023) further demonstrate that the formation of doctoral research topics is shaped not only by individual interests but also by research contexts, supervisory relationships, and conditions of academic

practice. This insight provides a theoretical basis for treating the advisor–student relationship as an independent analytical level in this study.

2.3 Analytical Framework of the Study

Based on the above literature and methodological considerations, this study establishes a three-level analytical framework. The first is the academic-tradition level, which examines the predominance of historically oriented research within calligraphy studies in both China and Korea, the relative marginalization of theoretical and educational research, and the tension between the inheritance of tradition and contemporary expansion. The second is the institutional level, which analyzes how departmental structures, curricula, international exchange environments, and research support systems within comprehensive universities shape the diversity of thesis topics and the formation of research directions. The third is the advisor–student level, which investigates how students' topic selection is structurally related to their advisors' research interests, areas of expertise, and supervisory practices.

Together, these three levels function as an analytical device for interpreting the distribution of thesis topics not merely as numerical data, but as the outcome of intersecting academic traditions, institutional environments, and research relationships.

More broadly, this framework also aligns with discussions of disciplinary formation and knowledge reproduction in higher education, in which research priorities are not generated solely by individual scholars but are shaped through the interaction of academic legitimacy, institutional arrangements, and supervisory structures. From this perspective, graduate theses may be read not only as individual research outputs but also as indicators of how disciplinary knowledge is selected, reproduced, and hierarchized within specific academic systems.

2.4 International Significance: Contemporary Transformation and Interdisciplinary Expansion of Calligraphy Studies in East Asia

The significance of this study extends beyond a simple comparison of two universities in China and Korea. More importantly, it demonstrates, through empirical analysis of graduate theses, how calligraphy studies are undergoing contemporary transformation within the broader context of the East Asian sinographic cultural sphere. The findings indicate that at Beijing Language and Culture University, studies in calligraphy history dominate overwhelmingly, reflecting a strong continuity of traditional, historically and philologically oriented research structures. In contrast, while calligraphy history remains central at Kyonggi University, there is a relatively greater proportion of studies in calligraphy theory and interdisciplinary or innovative research.

This difference suggests that, although calligraphy studies across East Asia continue to share a historically oriented academic structure, certain higher education contexts are gradually fostering interdisciplinary shifts and diversification of research topics. In particular, the presence of interdisciplinary and innovative research at Kyonggi University indicates that calligraphy studies are no longer confined to the domain of traditional art, but are expanding into areas such as psychology, sociology, visual arts, design, and digital technologies, thereby forming new academic horizons. Conversely, the case of Beijing Language and Culture University demonstrates that calligraphy studies still maintain a strong foundation in philological analysis, historical research, and traditional theoretical inquiry, reaffirming that the disciplinary identity of calligraphy in East Asia remains deeply rooted in historical accumulation.

In other words, the differences observed between the two institutions should not be understood merely as institutional variations, but as empirical evidence that calligraphy studies in East Asia are simultaneously developing along two trajectories: the preservation of tradition and the pursuit of contemporary expansion. In this respect, the present study contributes not only to comparative analysis between China and Korea, but also to a broader understanding of how calligraphy studies across the East Asian cultural sphere maintain shared structural characteristics while undergoing processes of differentiation and expansion.

Accordingly, this study seeks to reposition calligraphy studies beyond the narrow framework of preserving traditional art, situating them instead at the intersection of contemporary higher education and interdisciplinary humanities and arts research. Given that interdisciplinarity is increasingly understood as encompassing the integration of diverse bodies of knowledge, critical reflection, and capacities for communication and collaboration, the emergence of interdisciplinary and innovative research in calligraphy should not be regarded as

a peripheral phenomenon, but rather as a significant trend signaling potential structural transformation in East Asian calligraphy studies (Schijf et al., 2023).

Furthermore, by extending the scope of calligraphy studies beyond the boundaries of national traditions in China or Korea, this study proposes a comparative research agenda that connects East Asian textual culture, arts education, and interdisciplinary humanities and arts research. In doing so, it provides an empirical and foundational basis for the development of broader East Asian calligraphy studies, demonstrating how the discipline can maintain its historical foundations while simultaneously pursuing modern and interdisciplinary transformation.

3. Research Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Subjects and Data Collection

To compare the distribution of research topics and academic tendencies in higher calligraphy education in China and Korea, this study selected master's and doctoral theses related to calligraphy from Beijing Language and Culture University in China and Kyonggi University in Korea as its primary analytical materials. Both universities operate within comprehensive university systems and maintain relatively well-established calligraphy education structures spanning undergraduate to graduate levels. In this respect, they provide suitable cases for examining the institutional and academic characteristics of higher calligraphy education in East Asia.

The dataset was limited to master's and doctoral theses that had already been formally approved through public presentation and thesis examination procedures at each institution. For Beijing Language and Culture University, 26 graduate theses submitted over the most recent five-year period were collected, including 17 master's theses and 9 doctoral dissertations. For Kyonggi University, 38 calligraphy-related graduate theses submitted over the most recent three-year period were collected, consisting of 19 master's theses and 19 doctoral dissertations. Accordingly, the final sample analyzed in this study comprised a total of 64 graduate theses. Rather than representing a mechanically parallel comparison based on identical time spans, this dataset reflects an exploratory comparative design that prioritized the securing of comparable samples.

The reason for adopting different collection periods for the two institutions lies in the disparity in available sample size. Because the number of relevant theses at Beijing Language and Culture University was relatively limited, a five-year range was required to secure a minimally comparable sample. By contrast, at Kyonggi University, an adequate number of comparable theses could be obtained from only the most recent three years. This study therefore emphasizes the identification of comparable thesis samples and recent research tendencies, rather than imposing an artificially uniform chronological range. Such an approach may be understood as a practical comparative design that prioritizes the availability and interpretability of comparable materials over a rigid alignment of time units.

3.2 Analytical Categories and Classification Criteria

To compare the research topics of the collected theses, this study classified all theses into four categories: calligraphy theory, historical studies of calligraphy, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary and innovative research. This classification was not based solely on thesis titles. Rather, final categorizations were determined through a comprehensive review of each thesis's research objectives, primary research subjects, methods employed, key conceptual terms, and central argumentative focus.

The category of calligraphy theory included studies centered on classical calligraphy treatises in China and Korea, calligraphic aesthetics, calligraphy criticism, and discussions of the concepts and essence of calligraphy. The category of historical studies of calligraphy included research focusing on particular calligraphers, calligraphic works, stylistic developments, period-specific transformations in calligraphy, and the compilation or historical examination of calligraphy-related source materials. In the case of seal engraving studies, given the relatively limited proportion of independent seal studies within Korean university contexts, research centered on individual seal engravers, seal albums, or the historical development of seal studies was also classified under historical studies of calligraphy. The category of calligraphy education included research on ancient and contemporary systems of calligraphy education, curricular content, the history of calligraphy education, teaching methods, and issues related to instruction and learning. Finally, interdisciplinary and innovative research referred to studies that could not be clearly subsumed under the preceding three categories and were instead characterized by substantial

engagement with other disciplines, including psychology, sociology, visual arts, design, digital technology, and data analysis.

Some theses, however, exhibited features spanning more than one category, generating boundary cases in the classification process. In such instances, priority was given to identifying the thesis's principal research problem. Final classification was based less on the title than on the abstract, table of contents, and the relative weight of discussion in the core chapters. This procedure is consistent with a qualitative coding approach that prioritizes the structure of argumentation and the centrality of research questions over reliance on a single descriptive keyword.

3.3 Analytical Procedures and Methods

The analytical procedure of this study proceeded as follows. First, thesis lists from the two universities were collected, and the titles, abstracts, tables of contents, and major contents of each thesis were reviewed in order to organize basic information. Second, each thesis was classified into one of the four analytical categories established above. Third, the frequency and proportion of each category were calculated in order to compare topic distributions between the two universities, and the results were presented in tabular form. Finally, based on these distributional results, the study interpreted the shared tendencies and differences in higher calligraphy education in China and Korea, along with the background factors underlying them.

This study is an exploratory quantitative investigation centered on descriptive statistics, with the aim of revealing structural tendencies in the data rather than testing statistical causality. Accordingly, the analysis compared institutions primarily in terms of absolute frequency and relative proportion across categories, and interpreted the results in relation to academic traditions, advisors' research specializations, departmental structures, and curricular characteristics. In other words, the study sought not merely to calculate frequencies and proportions, but to interpret these distributions within the broader contexts of institutional arrangements and research environments. To reduce arbitrariness in classification, all samples underwent a two-stage review process: an initial classification followed by a second round of re-examination. In cases where a thesis could plausibly belong to multiple categories, it was assigned to the category that most strongly reflected its primary research objective and dominant argumentative emphasis. Moreover, because the total number of theses differed between the two universities, both raw frequencies and category-specific proportions were presented in order to strengthen the validity of comparison. This strategy was intended to enhance interpretability in comparative research involving unequal sample sizes by considering both absolute and relative indicators simultaneously.

It should also be noted that this study prioritizes the acquisition of a minimally comparable sample over strict equivalence in years of comparison. The results, therefore, should not be interpreted as a rigorous time-series comparison, but rather as a comparative analysis of the distributional structure of research topics.

3.4 Limitations of the Study

Although this study compares two comprehensive universities that may be regarded as representative cases of higher calligraphy education in China and Korea, the analysis is limited to these two institutions and therefore cannot be taken to encompass all aspects of higher calligraphy education in the two countries. In addition, because the classification of thesis topics inevitably involves interpretive judgment on the part of the researcher, a degree of ambiguity remains in certain cases where category boundaries are not entirely clear.

Furthermore, because the present analysis is based primarily on the texts of graduate theses, more precise interpretation would be possible in future research incorporating additional materials such as interviews with advisors, curricular documents, and departmental policy materials. In particular, because the formation of doctoral and graduate research topics must be understood in relation to the interaction of institutional conditions, supervision, and research environments, future studies should move beyond textual materials and include qualitative data at the level of relevant actors.

Nevertheless, this study retains significance in that it comparatively visualizes the distribution of research topics and the structural characteristics of higher calligraphy education in China and Korea through the empirical material of graduate theses. From this perspective, the study represents an exploratory attempt to illuminate the research structure of higher calligraphy education in East Asian calligraphy.

More broadly, the methodological significance of this study lies in its treatment of graduate theses not merely as educational outputs, but as institutionalized products of knowledge in which the research interests, institutional

priorities, and supervisory systems of a given university and discipline are condensed. Analysis of the frequency and proportion of thesis topics therefore goes beyond summarizing individual research content; it serves as an empirical means of revealing which research areas acquire centrality within higher calligraphy education and which remain relatively marginalized. In this respect, the present study suggests that thesis analysis may serve as an exploratory methodology for visualizing disciplinary structures and research biases in arts-based higher education.

4. Results

4.1 Imbalance in the Distribution of Thesis Topics: Findings

A comparative analysis of the distribution of research topics in master's and doctoral theses at the two institutions reveals a shared pattern of imbalance between historical studies of calligraphy and calligraphy theory in both Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University, which were selected as representative cases of higher calligraphy education in China and Korea. In addition, the temporal focus of research topics tends to be concentrated on specific historical periods rather than evenly distributed across time.

In particular, at both institutions, research centered on calligraphy history accounts for a relatively large proportion, whereas studies in calligraphy theory, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary or innovative research occupy comparatively limited shares. This pattern suggests that historically oriented research continues to dominate the academic structure of higher calligraphy education in both contexts.

The detailed distribution of thesis topics, including frequencies and proportions by category, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Thesis Topics by Frequency and Proportion at Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University

University	Total Number of Theses	Calligraphy Theory, n (%)	Historical Studies of Calligraphy, n (%)	Calligraphy Education, n (%)	Interdisciplinary and Innovative Research, n (%)
Beijing Language and Culture University	26	5 (19.2%)	21 (80.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Kyonggi University	38	11 (28.9%)	16 (42.1%)	1 (2.6%)	10 (26.3%)

Note: Frequencies and percentages were calculated based on the category classifications presented in the main text.

As shown in Table 1, the distribution of research topics in graduate theses at the two institutions reveals a clear imbalance. At Beijing Language and Culture University, theses categorized under historical studies of calligraphy account for the overwhelming majority, while research in calligraphy theory is comparatively limited. Moreover, theses addressing calligraphy education and interdisciplinary or innovative research are almost absent, indicating a pronounced concentration of research topics within a narrow domain.

By contrast, Kyonggi University exhibits a relatively more balanced distribution between historical studies and calligraphy theory. Nevertheless, the overall structure remains largely centered on historical research. Although a modest increase in interdisciplinary and innovative studies can be observed in recent years, their overall proportion remains limited. Taken together, these findings suggest that both institutions share a common tendency often described as “emphasizing history over theory.”

A closer examination of subcategories further reveals that while calligraphy theory maintains a certain presence at both institutions, it remains secondary to historical research. Meanwhile, calligraphy education and interdisciplinary studies occupy peripheral positions within the overall structure. This indicates that current graduate research in higher calligraphy education continues to be concentrated on traditional, historically oriented and artist-centered studies, while theoretical, educational, and interdisciplinary research has yet to be sufficiently

expanded. This distribution suggests not merely a difference in topic preference, but a structured hierarchy of knowledge within higher calligraphy education.

4.2 Interpretation of the Imbalance: Insights from Previous Studies

The observed pattern should not be understood as a phenomenon limited to specific institutions, but rather as part of a broader structural tendency within calligraphy studies. For instance, Kim (2024), in an analysis of doctoral dissertations in calligraphy over the past two decades in Chinese academic databases, found that historical studies account for more than half of the total, whereas theoretical and other research areas remain comparatively underrepresented. Furthermore, even within calligraphy theory, research tends to concentrate on calligraphic aesthetics and textual studies, indicating a narrowing of theoretical scope.

Such findings support the interpretation that the dominance of historically oriented research observed in this study is not incidental, but reflects a recurring pattern embedded within the broader academic structure of the field.

A similar trend can also be observed in journal publications. Zhang and Zhang (2022) conducted a keyword frequency analysis of long-term publications in Chinese Calligraphy and found that terms such as calligraphy art, calligraphers, calligraphy creation, and calligraphy history ranked highest, whereas theoretical topics such as calligraphic aesthetics and criticism appeared relatively infrequently. This suggests that historically and artist-centered research continues to occupy a dominant position, while theoretical reflection and critical discourse remain comparatively limited.

In the Korean context, comparable patterns are evident. Analyses of long-term thesis data at Kyonggi University show that, although research in calligraphic aesthetics, education, and theory is present, more than half of the total theses remain grounded in historical or practice-based studies. Keyword analyses of Korean academic journals and theses likewise indicate that historical studies occupy a central position, while calligraphy education, aesthetics, criticism, and interdisciplinary research tend to play supplementary roles. Taken together, these findings suggest that the results of the present study can be interpreted as an empirical instance of a broader structural tendency in which historically oriented research maintains a dominant position in higher calligraphy education across both China and Korea.

4.3 Developmental Potential of Underrepresented Areas: Seal Studies, Calligraphy Education, and Interdisciplinary Research

The comparative analysis also highlights several areas that, while currently underrepresented, demonstrate significant potential for future development. In particular, seal studies, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary research emerge as domains occupying peripheral positions within the overall distribution.

In the case of seal studies, despite seal engraving being a core component of undergraduate calligraphy curricula in both countries, related research at the graduate level remains highly limited. At Beijing Language and Culture University, seal-related studies are confined primarily to a small number of master's theses and are largely absent at the doctoral level. Similarly, at Kyonggi University, although some theses address seal engraving, they tend to focus on individual modern Chinese seal artists, with relatively little attention given to broader topics such as seal theory, seal aesthetics, creative methodologies, or paleographic interpretation.

A similar pattern is observed in calligraphy education research. Despite its importance in terms of cultural transmission and pedagogical practice, it accounts for only a marginal proportion of graduate theses at both institutions. This suggests that, although calligraphy education plays a significant role in actual educational practice, it has not yet been sufficiently theorized or systematized at the level of graduate research.

By contrast, interdisciplinary and innovative research represents a key area of divergence between the two institutions. At Kyonggi University, such research appears more prominently, although it still constitutes a relatively small proportion overall. At Beijing Language and Culture University, however, this category is almost entirely absent. This indicates that while both systems remain largely anchored in traditional research structures, certain institutional contexts are beginning to foster the gradual expansion of interdisciplinary approaches.

4.4 Interpretation of Underrepresented Areas

These findings align with recent scholarly concerns regarding the limited scope of certain research domains within calligraphy studies. In the case of seal studies, previous research has noted that seal-related topics remain

underrepresented not only in graduate theses but also in journal publications. This suggests that seal studies continue to occupy a relatively restricted position within the broader field, while simultaneously indicating substantial potential for future expansion. Considering the historical development of epigraphy in the early twentieth century through interdisciplinary engagement, seal studies likewise may benefit from increased cross-disciplinary interaction.

A similar interpretation applies to calligraphy education research. Jia (2025), using CiteSpace analysis of calligraphy education research over the past 30 years in China, found that while keywords such as calligraphy and calligraphy education appear frequently, terms such as higher education and calligraphy studies rank relatively low. This indicates that research in calligraphy education remains largely at a practical or foundational level and has yet to achieve substantial theoretical expansion within higher education contexts. The low proportion of calligraphy education-related theses identified in this study can be understood within this broader context.

Interdisciplinary research, meanwhile, has emerged as a significant trend in the arts and humanities more broadly. Zhang (2025), in an analysis of National Social Science Fund projects related to calligraphy, observed that research topics have expanded over the past decade to include not only calligraphy aesthetics, history, and techniques, but also intersections with philosophy, art studies, history, archaeology, and literature. This trend indicates that calligraphy studies are increasingly incorporating diverse methodological perspectives and expanding their academic scope.

From this perspective, the relatively higher proportion of interdisciplinary research observed at Kyonggi University should not be viewed as an isolated anomaly, but rather as indicative of a possible future trajectory for the field.

In sum, while seal studies, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary research currently occupy relatively marginal positions within higher calligraphy education in both China and Korea, they also represent key domains with significant developmental potential. Expanding research in these areas and deepening methodological approaches may contribute to broadening the disciplinary scope of calligraphy studies, promoting interdisciplinary integration, and ultimately achieving a more balanced development of higher calligraphy education.

Importantly, the differences observed in topic distribution should not be attributed merely to differences in the number of theses at each institution. Rather, they should be understood as the result of the complex interaction of academic traditions, institutional structures, and advisor–student relationships within the broader context of East Asian calligraphy studies. In this sense, the distribution of thesis topics functions not merely as an aggregate of individual research outputs, but as a structural indicator of how higher calligraphy education is academically organized and reproduced.

5. Discussion

5.1 Orientation of Academic Research Traditions

The imbalance between historical studies of calligraphy and calligraphy theory has long been recognized as a central issue within the field. Jiang (2025) observes that the dominance of philologically oriented historical research has led to a relative contraction in the scope of calligraphy theory, aesthetics, and art historical inquiry. He further argues that this tendency blurs the conceptual boundaries between textual verification and historical research, thereby creating confusion in disciplinary classification and the orientation of scholarly inquiry. Moreover, he emphasizes that, over recent decades, theoretical criticism, art history, and calligraphic aesthetics have received comparatively limited attention, while research centered on textual verification has become the prevailing trend in graduate theses. Analyses of doctoral dissertations over the past two decades similarly confirm that studies in theory, aesthetics, and art history remain underrepresented relative to historical and philological research.

The differences in topic distribution observed between the two institutions should therefore not be understood merely as variations in research preference, but as reflections of broader differences in higher art education systems and the institutionalization of calligraphy studies. In China, calligraphy has historically developed in close association with philology, calligraphy history, and epigraphy, which confers strong academic legitimacy on historically oriented research topics within graduate education. In contrast, in Korea, calligraphy education has increasingly engaged with modern art education, comparative art, cultural content studies, psychology, and practice-based art education, creating conditions under which interdisciplinary research topics may emerge more

actively in certain institutional contexts. These differences indicate that, while sharing a common cultural foundation, calligraphy studies in the two countries are undergoing distinct processes of modernization within their respective higher education systems.

This tendency—often described as “emphasizing history over theory”—may hinder the realization of the balanced structure of history, theory, and criticism emphasized in art theory. It may also constrain the development of calligraphy studies as an autonomous academic discipline. Meanwhile, areas such as seal studies, epigraphy, calligraphy education, and interdisciplinary research remain comparatively underdeveloped, a pattern that is likewise reflected in the thesis distributions analyzed in this study. Recent discussions in arts education and research methodology increasingly stress the need for multi-layered interpretation and methodological reconstruction tailored to the nature of research materials. In this respect, calligraphy studies are similarly required to pursue not only the inheritance of tradition but also theoretical and methodological refinement.

A comparable imbalance is also evident in research methodologies. To date, textual analysis and iconographic analysis have been the most widely employed methods in calligraphy studies, and these approaches are frequently repeated even in research focused on the materiality of calligraphic practice itself. This reflects long-established research conventions within the field. Zhu (2022) likewise points out that contemporary calligraphy theory remains heavily oriented toward ancient materials and often fails to adequately capture developments in contemporary calligraphy. Such observations suggest that calligraphy studies continue to rely heavily on historical and philological methodologies, and that engagement with other disciplines remains largely receptive rather than reciprocal.

In other words, although theoretical frameworks from philosophy, literature, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and economics have been increasingly introduced into calligraphy research, the field has yet to develop a reciprocal structure in which it contributes theoretical resources back to other disciplines. This asymmetry—characterized by active inflow but limited outflow of interdisciplinary knowledge—may constrain the circulation of research resources and limit the expansion of calligraphy studies. In this sense, the comparative findings of this study may be interpreted not only as institution-specific observations, but also as empirical evidence of a broader structural asymmetry between historical and theoretical research within East Asian calligraphy studies. This pattern may be understood not simply as a thematic preference, but as a form of history-centered epistemological reproduction within higher calligraphy education.

5.2 The Relationship Between Advisors’ Research Areas and Students’ Thesis Topics

The relationship between advisors’ research areas and students’ thesis topics may also be interpreted as part of a broader process of disciplinary reproduction, in which institutionalized forms of academic legitimacy shape topic selection. A comprehensive review of thesis topics at the two institutions suggests that students’ topic selection may be structurally related to their advisors’ research interests and academic backgrounds. For instance, at Beijing Language and Culture University, thesis topics tend to concentrate on studies of calligraphers from the Ming–Qing and modern periods, whereas at Kyonggi University, interdisciplinary and innovative research topics appear more prominently. These differences cannot be fully explained by individual student choice alone, nor can they be attributed solely to the influence of advisors. Rather, they likely reflect the combined effects of advisors’ research specializations, curricular structures, and institutional academic environments.

Graduate education at both institutions is largely organized around an advisor-centered supervision model, in which coursework is often aligned with the advisor’s area of expertise. Given that both universities employ a system centered on a primary advisor, often supported by secondary supervisors, it is reasonable to assume that students’ academic directions are likely to intersect with their advisors’ research interests. In contemporary calligraphy programs, advisors frequently engage not only in artistic practice but also in theoretical research, academic activities, and broader social engagement, thereby providing an important intellectual framework that may influence students’ topic formation. However, this relationship should be understood at a structural level rather than as a direct causal determination of individual thesis topics.

Curricular structures also contribute to this relationship. At Beijing Language and Culture University, training for graduate students includes methodological instruction closely related to thesis writing, such as research ethics, academic norms, and bibliometric analysis. In contrast, Kyonggi University offers courses that promote broader perspectives, including comparative East–West art history, artwork analysis, and studies in East Asian art

philosophy. These differences are closely related to the interdisciplinary capacities of comprehensive universities and may be understood as institutional conditions shaping students' topic selection.

Institutional research platforms further reinforce these tendencies. Bao (2022), in an analysis of doctoral dissertations in calligraphy, notes that because calligraphy has not yet been fully established as an independent first-level discipline, thesis topics often tend to cluster in specific areas depending on departmental structures and research orientations at individual universities. This suggests that topic selection is not purely a matter of individual autonomy, but is shaped by institutional contexts and disciplinary structures. In this sense, the formation of research topics should be understood as the result of interactions among personal interests, institutional environments, and supervisory relationships.

Moreover, the alignment between advisors' research areas and students' thesis topics may also influence the research process itself. Previous studies in higher education suggest that selecting topics closely aligned with an advisor's expertise can enhance supervisory efficiency and increase the stability of research progress. Baker and Pifer (2015), for example, introduce the concept of "fit" in doctoral education, arguing that alignment among individuals, institutions, cultures, and disciplinary fields plays a critical role in shaping doctoral experiences and outcomes. While such perspectives may offer useful insights for higher calligraphy education, the present study does not provide sufficient evidence to establish a direct causal relationship between advisors' expertise and time-to-degree. Therefore, this relationship is better understood as a plausible structural tendency rather than a deterministic factor. Bai (2018) similarly emphasizes that thesis topic selection involves multiple considerations, including time constraints, access to materials, the knowledge structures of both advisors and students, and broader financial and social conditions. These observations further support the view that topic formation is shaped by complex and interacting factors rather than a single determining variable.

5.3 Prospects for Interdisciplinary and Innovative Research

Overall, in the Korean context—particularly at Kyonggi University—graduate research topics tend to be more open and practice-oriented, with a gradual increase in the proportion of interdisciplinary studies. This may be attributed to the relatively broad academic perspectives of advisors and their active engagement with diverse disciplinary approaches. In contrast, Chinese calligraphy education remains more strongly oriented toward traditional historical and theoretical research, with relatively limited expansion into interdisciplinary domains. These differences offer important implications for the future development of higher calligraphy education.

Interdisciplinary and innovative research should not be regarded as a peripheral phenomenon, but rather as a potential driver of structural transformation within the field. The relatively open and practice-oriented educational model observed in Korea—characterized by diversified curricula, expanded faculty expertise, and active international academic exchange—may serve as a useful reference model for expanding the academic scope of calligraphy studies. Such developments suggest that, while maintaining traditional research foundations, calligraphy studies can enhance their explanatory power by engaging with adjacent fields such as arts education, visual culture, social practice, therapy, and design.

At the same time, the incorporation of artificial intelligence, big data, and digital technologies presents both new opportunities and challenges for calligraphy research. A range of academic forums and initiatives have recently emerged in response to these developments, including international graduate forums at Nanjing University of the Arts, academic conferences at East China Normal University, and doctoral exchange programs at Zhengzhou University. These initiatives actively explore innovative research methods and technological tools. In addition, regional academic organizations have contributed to deepening research on the materiality of calligraphy and stimulating scholarly discourse. Digital environments are also reshaping the very formulation of research questions in art history and the humanities, as digital technologies not only transform the preservation and transmission of research objects but also reconfigure research practices and knowledge production structures (Pugh, 2020). These developments suggest that calligraphy studies may increasingly engage with digital archiving, data-driven analysis, and cultural transmission research.

In light of these trends, future higher calligraphy education should maintain the accumulation of traditional scholarship while more actively incorporating interdisciplinary curricula, co-supervision models, digital humanities-based research training, and international comparative research projects. In particular, the transition of calligraphy studies beyond a historically oriented structure toward greater theoretical development, pedagogical

integration, and interdisciplinary expansion requires institutional support in terms of departmental strategies and research infrastructure. In other words, the diversification of thesis topics is not solely a function of individual creativity, but is also shaped by structural conditions embedded within educational policy and institutional design. These developments indicate that calligraphy studies are moving beyond a single disciplinary framework and are increasingly forming new research paradigms through interaction with diverse fields. In the future, the discipline is likely to expand further through methodological diversification, reinterpretation of traditional issues, and integrative approaches from an international perspective. Such paradigm shifts represent both a central challenge and a significant opportunity for the continued development of calligraphy studies.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the distribution of research topics in graduate theses on calligraphy at Beijing Language and Culture University and Kyonggi University, with the aim of identifying structural patterns in higher calligraphy education in East Asia. By employing a comparative and quantitative approach to a dataset of 64 theses, the study reveals that both institutions exhibit a strong concentration on historical studies of calligraphy, while theoretical, educational, and interdisciplinary research remains comparatively underdeveloped. This imbalance suggests that higher calligraphy education in both China and Korea continues to be shaped by a historically oriented disciplinary structure.

Beyond documenting a distributional imbalance, this study argues that higher calligraphy education in East Asia continues to operate within a history-centered epistemological structure that shapes what counts as legitimate research, what is institutionally reproduced, and what remains marginal within the discipline. The predominance of historical inquiry in calligraphy studies is not merely a matter of scholarly preference, but is deeply embedded in long-standing academic traditions, institutional configurations, and pedagogical systems. In this regard, the findings highlight the persistence of a “history-centered epistemology,” which continues to define the intellectual core of calligraphy as an academic field.

At the same time, the comparative results indicate emerging signs of transformation. In particular, the relatively higher proportion of interdisciplinary and innovative research at Kyonggi University suggests that calligraphy studies are gradually expanding beyond their traditional boundaries and engaging with adjacent fields such as visual culture, design, psychology, and digital humanities. This shift reflects a broader trend in contemporary higher education, in which artistic disciplines are increasingly reconfigured through cross-disciplinary integration and methodological diversification. Such developments point to the possibility that calligraphy may evolve from a traditionally bounded art discipline into a more dynamic and hybrid field within the wider domain of humanities and arts research.

From a methodological perspective, this study demonstrates that the analysis of graduate theses can serve as an effective empirical tool for uncovering otherwise implicit structures within academic disciplines. Graduate theses, as institutionalized research outputs, encapsulate not only individual scholarly interests but also the cumulative effects of academic traditions, supervisory systems, and curricular frameworks. Therefore, the quantitative examination of thesis topics provides a valuable lens through which the internal organization, priorities, and limitations of a discipline can be systematically visualized.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on non-Western disciplinary formation by offering an empirically grounded account of how an East Asian art form is institutionalized and reproduced within modern higher education systems. While much of the existing literature on higher education and disciplinary development has been dominated by Western-centric models, the case of calligraphy studies in China and Korea illustrates an alternative trajectory, in which traditional cultural knowledge continues to exert a strong influence on contemporary academic structures. In this sense, the study not only enriches the understanding of calligraphy as a field, but also provides insights into the plural forms of knowledge organization in global academia.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The analysis is based on data from only two universities, which may not fully represent the diversity of higher calligraphy education across East Asia. In addition, the classification of thesis topics inevitably involves interpretive judgment, particularly in cases where research spans multiple categories. Future research may expand the scope of comparison to include a wider range of institutions and incorporate qualitative data such as interviews with faculty members and graduate students, as well as analyses

of curricula and institutional policies. Moreover, the application of digital methods such as text mining and network analysis could further refine the understanding of thematic structures and their evolution over time.

The central challenge facing higher calligraphy education, therefore, is not merely how to preserve tradition, but how to reorganize the discipline so that theoretical inquiry, pedagogical research, and interdisciplinary engagement can acquire greater institutional legitimacy. In this respect, the future of calligraphy studies depends not only on the continuation of inherited knowledge, but also on the reconfiguration of the academic structures through which that knowledge is produced, valued, and transmitted..

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