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TRACES OF ZEN BUDDHISM WITHIN JAPANESE CALLIGRAPHY – A CULTURAL SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. ***Traces of Zen Buddhism Within Japanese Calligraphy – a Cultural Semiotic Perspective*.** This article showcases the Japanese art of calligraphy –*shodō*– through its close link to Zen Buddhism. The comparison between *shodō* and Zen spirituality and philosophy is done within the cultural semiotics framework, showcasing the common ground between the two, rather than the differences, thus revealing the meaning of *shodō* within the Japanese cultural context. In order to reflect this relationship, the article presents the fundamentals of *shodō*, its influence and role within the Japanese society, carefully building into the connection between Zen philosophy and the practices of *shodō*. Ultimately, the theoretical constructs are demonstrated by analyzing 3 calligraphic works created by Rodica Frenţiu, pinpointing the similarities between Japanese calligraphy and Zen Buddhism.

Keywords*: shodō, Japanese calligraphy, Zen, Buddhism, calligraphy, cultural semiotics, Japanese studies, kanji.*

REZUMAT. ***Urme ale budismului Zen în caligrafia japoneză – o perspectivă a semioticii culturale*.** Articolul reliefează caligrafia japoneză ca artă – *shodō* – prin legătura strânsă pe care aceasta o are cu budismul Zen. Comparaţia dintre *shodō* şi religia-filozofie Zen este realizată prin prisma semioticii culturale, evidenţiind elementele comune dintre cele două, mai degrabă decât ceea ce le diferenţiază, arătând astfel semnificaţia caligrafiei în contextul cultural japonez. Pentru a putea reflecta această legătură, articolul prezintă elementele fundamentale *shodō*, influenţa acestei arte şi rolul ei în societate, ajungând treptat la legătura dintre filozofia Zen şi practica *shodō.* În cele din urmă, cadrul teoretic este demonstrat prin analiza a 3 caligrame create de Rodica Frenţiu, subliniind similarităţile dintre caligrafia japoneză şi budismul Zen.

Cuvinte-cheie*: shodō, caligrafie japoneză, Zen, budism, caligrafie, semiotică culturală, studii japoneze, kanji.*

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An art form that can express dynamic and profound emotions where spoken word may fail the speaker, Japanese calligraphy – also known as *shodō* – is one of the traditional Japanese arts which have transcended the passing of time, constantly reinventing itself while keeping its core intact.

The flexibility of calligraphy, which allowed artists to include within their work aspects of other arts, be it traditional Japanese arts or even elements of occidental influence, led to *shodō* remaining constantly relevant throughout history, gradually gaining popularity and people's interest.

When looking at a calligram, two substantial components can be identified: a linguistic component – the written character, word or sentence – and a visual component –the artistic form that represents the linguistic component –, thus combining both visual aspects and scriptural aspects (see Frenţiu 2017, 218).

An important element that contributed to calligraphy's timelessness is, undoubtedly, the Japanese writing system itself. A complex system that includes *kanji* – Chinese characters –, two *kana* syllabaries, as well as the Latin alphabet – *rōmaji* –, is but one of the reasons why *shodō* bloomed over the years into a wonderful expression of the creative mind.

Shodō's evolution is closely linked to the evolution of writing in Japan, as both originated in China and have undergone a process of change from the moment of their borrowing and assimilation to the present day. Chinese-style calligraphy was first introduced in Japan around 600 CE (see Sato 2013, 12). Japanese scholars originally used calligraphy to write directly in Chinese, rather than Japanese (see Suzuki 2016, 6), as Japanese writing itself was not yet standardized. Quickly after its contact with the Japanese culture, calligraphy has gained an important social role, becoming a vital element in the education and the spiritual growth of the higher class (see Simu 2004, 197-198).

Similar to the adaptation process of other arts that originated in foreign countries, *shodō* started by recreating the works of the Chinese masters, then gradually evolved into a Japan-specific style, when introducing *kana* syllabaries in the art of writing. Because in the 9th century the Japanese imperial court stopped sending ambassadors to China (see Suzuki 2016, 8), the Japanese arts and crafts stopped recreating Chinese models and instead focused on a style that would represent the Japanese mentality and spirituality.

With the rapid evolution and popularity gain of the *kana* syllabaries, collections of poems showcased the calligraphers' craftsmanship and artistic talent, thus supporting the creation of a unique Japanese style. Such an example is 古今和歌集 (*Kokin wakashū*), "Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times" (see Suzuki 2016, 8), which showcased the new calligraphic style and its use of *kana,* specifically *hiragana*. The use of *kana* syllabaries in

shodō ultimately lead to an authentic calligraphy style that was distancing itself from its Chinese roots. Instead of following the technical rules of the Chinese-style calligraphy, where each character was fit into a square in order to achieve balance from a visual standpoint, the Japanese style focused on cursivity and on the connection between each character, filling the empty, white spaces and focusing on freedom of creation (see Sato 2013, 12).

Ever since the introduction of the Chinese-style calligraphy in Japan, this art was quickly regarded as an important aspect in the education of noble and royal families. In learning calligraphy, students would initially practice by copying the works of Chinese masters and the works of their master, a practice still present in modern times. Handwriting showed off the writer's education and sophistication and was regarded as an important indicator of culture and nobility. Although women were not taught how to write with Chinese characters, the development of *hiragana*, also known as 女手 (*onnade)* (see Murase 2002, 17), a feminine writing style regarded as such because of its cursivity and simplicity by comparison to *kanji*, allowed some of the women from the Imperial Court to write important works that are still vastly appreciated today.

Such an example is *Genji Monogatari*, written by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu at the beginning of the 11th century. The novel illustrates women's script in writing, as well as their elegant use of words and language. Within this classic literary work, the reader notices permanent indications of the important role that poetry had within society in the respective era, namely Heian period (794-1185). The communication between two lovers could take the form of an exchange of poems which reflected their feelings. The great number of poems scattered around the novel proves the important role of poetry in everyday life. It is not, therefore, surprising that the manner in which these poems were written, their visual aspect, was, in fact, an important element to be considered. Delicately chosen words had to be reflected in handwriting, enhancing the power of a person's feelings for their lover. Beautiful handwriting indicated not only the social status of the writer, but also revealed a part of their personality (see Murase 2002, 11).

While reading *Genji Monogatari,* one comes to understand the great social impact of writing. Within a famous heated argument about the feminine ideal, writing becomes a way in which a woman can even hide her defects because not only do such women deliberately use innocent words, but also the ink with which they have chosen to write is "so faint a man can scarcely read them" (Shikibu 1992, 28), thus skillfully concealing their imperfections.

Buddhist monks also contributed greatly to the impact and importance of calligraphy in Japan, as writing and copying sutras and religious texts led to

a refined, delightful writing style. Buddhist monk and poet Kenkō believed that writing was an essential skill, as it is "an important instrument that further helps in the learning process" (Kenkō 2015, 122).

Although calligraphy was originally an art of the noble and rich, nowadays everyone has access to it, both Japanese people as well as foreigners interested in the Japanese culture and arts. *Shodō* and *shūji* are presently two of the most important and efficient ways to learn and practice Japanese writing.

The Japanese school system offers students the possibility to choose a calligraphy class where students initially learn and practice the stroke order of a character and the way each component is related to the bigger picture of the said character or the context in which it is used. If these lessons arouse the interest and curiosity of the student, they can further pursue their interest by entering *shodō* school clubs and participating in contests or 書道パフォーマンス, calligraphy performances where a group of artists or young people create together one large-scale calligram on the rhythm of a melody. The body movements, as well as the brush movements are in sync with the music and the genres used are not being limited only to traditional music, including also j-rock or j-pop or dance.

Shodō, therefore, incorporates both elements of tradition and modernity, creating a delicate bridge that connects the past and the present, balancing aspects from multiple cultural aspects and multiple eras. Consequently, it is of no surprise that *shodō* has a strong connection to other traditional Japanese arts such as *ikebana*, tea ceremony, martial arts, but also with Zen philosophy and spirituality.

Particularly relevant to this study are the common elements that *shodō* and Zen philosophy and spirituality share. From a cultural semiotics' perspective, "all human activity concerned with the processing, exchange, and storage of information possesses a certain unity" (Uspenskij et al 1998, 33), thus making it important to us to show the aspects which endorse the sense of unity between the objects of our analysis. As a result, our analysis will be conducted from the standpoint of the common ground between the two, focusing on similarities, rather than differences. For a better understanding of how Zen influence spread rapidly to numerous aspects of the Japanese culture, a brief introduction into its history and beginnings is necessary.

Zen Buddhism has been introduced in Japan in Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1336-573) periods (see Simu 2004, 84) and, similarly to *shodō*, it was imported to the Land of the Rising Sun through China. The first Japanese scholar who went to China and got introduced to Zen Buddhism is Dōshō, who, upon his return to Japan, proceeded to create a room for Zen meditation in Gango temple, Nara (see Nukariya 2014, 38). The first Zen school was founded by Eisai in 1192, however, the one considered to have brought authentic Zen Buddhism to Japan is Dōgen, also known as Joyo Daishi (see Nukariya 2014, 39-41).

Upon its introduction in the Japanese culture, Zen was well-received, quickly gaining popularity and integrating within the already-existing social and cultural values. Zen allowed people to solve spiritual problems in a manner that was fitting to the mentality of the era, as it corresponded to the samurai class that was ascending during the Kamakura period (see Simu 2004, 84). The samurai class and the Zen monks shared similarities such as following strict rules, having great endurance, leading an austere lifestyle and ultimately not being well-off from a financial standpoint (see Nukariya 2014, 39-41).

Zen was regarded as a different concept, as it does not praise any deity, does not meddle with what happens to the soul after death or any other issue commonly reflected by religion. Zen aims to see the world as it is, to break free from the ideas and ideals formerly learned and to view the world without any preconceived notions. This can be achieved through attaining a state of 無心 (*mushin*), a state where one is completely free from mundane problems, attachments and desires (see Frenţiu 2017, 224). The ultimate goal is to reach illumination or 悟り(*satori*), which, unlike the vision of other Buddhist schools, occurs in an instant, when the practitioner might not expect it. The path to enlightenment is not, therefore, a gradual journey, but rather a shift from all that means mundane restrictions, to a world of true freedom of mind and spirit (see Juniper 2003, 22).

In establishing direct contact with the world and with nature, verbal interpretation and communication do not play an important role, as it would mean filtering reality through it: "The mind should be a window, rather than a mirror, so that the world is seen directly and not through the filters of the intellect." (Juniper 2003, 26), thus attempting to explain or reflect reality through words could only offer an abstract image of what it actually is. As a result, other means of getting to understand reality are needed and Zen brings forth meditation as a solution, a practice that was able to channel the train of thought to the true image of the world.

One of the most important Zen practices is 座禅 (*zazen*), a type of meditation where the body posture plays a primary role. *Zazen* is one of the first similarities between Zen and *shodō*, as in both Zen meditation and Japanese calligraphy the position of the body has a great impact on the quality of the final result. In Zen, the body posture facilitates meditation and clears the mind of meaningless thoughts, whereas in calligraphy a good body posture allows the calligrapher to better trace the shape of the characters, having a good outlook on the piece of paper, as well as on all the other materials used for writing and, of course, on the written composition itself. When it comes to the body position in *shodō*, the back needs to be straight, the shoulders must be balanced, and the feet anchored to the ground. This allows the body to properly breathe regularly, the calligrapher's arm moving easier to form precise brush strokes.

Breathing is another important sign in both *shodō* and Zen. The creator needs to learn how to control their breathing and to concentrate their energy, 気(*ki*) in the lower part of their abdomen. By internalizing this energy, they are later able to focus, to pick up the brush and finish a whole work in a matter of seconds (see Sato 2013, 10). Given the fact that a character or a stroke, depending on its complexity, needs to be written in one breath, an artist picks up the brush, breathes in, then writes while exhaling. This breathing technique allows the practitioner to control the "mental activity of its consciousness" (Deshimaru 2016, 114), thus reaching a state of mind of stillness, of no-thought, also known as *mushin*.

The *mushin* state of mind, a state in which a person clears their head of mundane thoughts and distances themselves from everyday problems and desires, is needed and encouraged in *shodō*, as well as in Zen meditation. When creating a new calligraphic piece, the master clears their mind of unwanted thoughts and focuses on the word, the sentence, or the poem they are about to write. It is an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of what they are about to write and to understand its profound symbolism. The moment in which the mind of the practitioner snaps out of this state similar to meditation, the hand hesitates, and the lack of focus will be reflected in the final result. Any hesitation, any derailed thought will be visible through the written composition, which is why the *mushin* state of mind has in *shodō* an equally important role as in Zen meditation.

Traditionally, the ink, 墨 (*sumi*), used for calligraphy can be purchased as an ink stick that the calligrapher will grind on the grinding stone, 硯(*suzuri*), adding water depending on how deep the color black should be, ultimately starting to write. The moments spent grinding are the perfect opportunity for the artist to empty their mind of noise, of mundane worries and to concentrate on what they are about to create. It is considered that the ink obtained by grinding *sumi* on *suzuri* is filled with the creator's vital energy, thus the black traces of ink on paper contain this concentrated energy, also known as 墨気 (*bokki*) (see Sato 2013, 10). The *bokki* within a piece of work is what moves the viewer and what shows the creator's spirituality shining through their work. At times, the *bokki* may not be noticed instantly, especially if the eye of the viewer is not used to looking for the essential aspects in a calligram, or if they are not receptive to this particular art style. However, if there is *bokki* in the traces of black ink on the white paper, it will be observed and felt by the admirer, who can spiritually connect to the artwork (see Sato 2013, 10).

Further deepening the connection between Zen spiritualism and Japanese calligraphy, it is important to underline the fact that Zen teachings and fragments of Zen philosophy have been calligraphed over time, such works being

known as 墨跡 (*bokuseki*) (see Sato 2013, 12). In other words, *shodō* has been a way to visually represent the linguistic meaning of Zen philosophy. Furthermore, the depictions of 公案 (*kōan*), Zen Buddhist aphorisms that are meant to instigate one's mind in order to achieve illumination, have been calligraphed since the introduction of Zen in Japan, being named 禅語 (*zengo*) (see Sato 2013, 12). The majority of them are calligraphed using mostly Chinese ideograms, rather than the *kana* syllabaries, as the *kōan* often have Chinese roots and have kept the same form over the course of the years. Without prior knowledge of Zen Buddhism or *shodō* writing styles, understanding the meaning of *bokuseki* and reaching the *bokki* can prove to be a great challenge. For this reason, within most *shodō* expositions the calligraphic works are followed by a printed representation of the ideogram, word or line represented by the *sho* artist.

For a greater understanding of Zen calligraphy and in order to illustrate the particularities of this type of *sho* art, we will proceed by analyzing two calligrams created by the artist Rodica Frenţiu. Particularly relevant for our research is the way in which the linguistic component and the visual component reflect the similarities previously discussed. The calligraphic works were chosen on basis of their close link to Zen philosophy, not only through the way in which they were created (body posture, ink grinding or breathing technique), but also through their semantic meaning and symbolism.

Fig. 1. 一期一会 (*Ichi go ichi e*)

Roughly translated as "One lifetime, one meeting" or "Each meeting is unique", the meaning of the *zengo* composed of four ideograms 一期一会 (*Ichi go ichi e*) contains the ephemerality of life and the impact that one meeting can leave within our souls and lives. Each moment should be cherished, as there is no possibility to replicate it after its passing. The semantic meaning of the *zengo* supports people in appreciating the present moment and in seeing the power of one meeting, which can prove to be a decisive factor for the rest of our lives.

Ichi go ichi e is oftentimes used in tea ceremony, 茶道 (*sadō*), and it is said to represent the very mentality and state of mind that a tea ceremony participant should have when entering the *chashitsu,* the tearoom. Historically, in politically and socially troubled times, the higher class and the class of the samurai or the warriors found peace of mind in the tea ceremony. Upon entering the *chashitsu,* they were able to leave all mundane worries behind and to focus on the present moment, the meeting with the tea master, with the other participants and with the tea (see Juniper 2003, 33). The tea ceremony itself became a way to achieve the *mushin* state of mind.

S*adō* is a complex experience that brings together one's senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing in a multilayered encounter (see Juniper 2003, 37). Particularly significant in attaining a state of peace is, undoubtedly, the tearoom itself. The tearoom's simplicity calms the minds of the participants and encourages them to get in touch with their spirituality. In the 床 (*tokonoma*), a space in the Japanese-style room where art objects are displayed, one can often find a flower arrangement (生け花 *ikebana*) and above it 掛物 (*kakemono* or *kakejiku*), a work of calligraphy which thematically complements the flower arrangement, the season when the tea ceremony takes place, or the theme of the ceremony. The guests can find these two objects as an invitation to reflect and further detach themselves from the everyday problems and establish a spiritual connection with the tea, as the colors of the flowers and the powerful black ink contrast with the simplicity of the tearoom (see Juniper 2003, 39-40).

Ichi go ichi e is oftentimes used as the *kakejiku* in tea ceremony, as in the case of such an event, even if the faces of the guests, the master, as well as the tearoom are the same, the meeting itself is unique and cannot be replicated even if the same conditions are met at a later date. However, this expression is extremely flexible and not reserved solely to *sadō* practices, being used in daily conversation as a 四字熟語 (*yojijukugo*) – an idiomatic expression composed of four *kanji* ideograms (see Frenţiu 2018, 111) –, and as a reminder of the importance of the present moment.

The complex meaning of this expression and its timeless symbolism is contained within the traces of black ink in the calligram created by Rodica Frenţiu. Written in the semi-cursive 行書 (*gyōsho*) style, the message remains clear and easy to read even for the ones who do not have much experience in reading *sho* works. What catches the observer's eye is the fact that the strokes are delicately connected, as the brush does not completely lift off the paper between each stroke, creating a graceful final effect. As opposed to the 楷書 (*kaisho*) writing style, by using *gyōsho,* the artist gains freedom when visually expressing the linguistic meaning of the *zengo*.

The four ideograms are harmoniously balanced, each *kanji* being carefully defined and represented. Although the strokes have been simplified in order to create a cursive image, each ideogram can still be clearly read and understood, even without any explanation as to how the *zengo* is read.

The ink is an intense shade of black as to underline the powerful message, while the lines are distinct and steady. Such a substantial final result can only be acquired through proper body posture, as the black ink holds no traces of hesitation or indecision, an indicator of the artist's focus and concentration. These elements are proof of the creator's *ki*, the power which was conveyed within the ink that will continue to touch the spirits of the viewers throughout time.

As seen in Fig.1., the two representations of the 一 (*ichi*) ideogram are two separate instances of the same word, written in a slightly different manner, as to avoid redundancy and to convey vitality. Whereas the first 一 is strongly articulated, in the case of the second *kanji* one can notice a 掠れ (*kasure*), an interrupted stroke, where spots of the white paper contrast with the black ink. This technique conveys dynamism and force, pinpointing to the meaning and symbolism of the expression – the importance of the one meeting that can only occur once in a lifetime.

In *shodō*, the place where a calligram will be exposed is a major factor in deciding the details about the writing style, as well as the linguistic and the visual components. The currently analyzed calligram can be found in the Japanese language classroom of the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai Univesity. The *sho* artwork serves as a reminder to the students that although they might have daily language classes, in the same classroom, with the same teachers, surrounded by the same classmates, each course, each meeting is unique and can not be recreated. This realization encourages them to try their best and make the best out of the time spent understanding the particularities of the Japanese language and culture.

Traces of Zen philosophy can be, therefore, identified not only within the linguistic component, as the content of the calligram is a *zengo* used in tea ceremony and other Zen-inspired arts and practices, but also within the visual component which enhances the linguistic meaning, as the brush movement indicates the artist's focus and instigates the admirer's contemplation on the meaning of the *zengo*.

Fig. 2.1. 夢 (*yume*), Dream [written with the author's eyes opened]

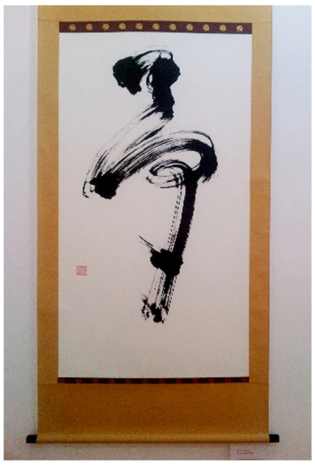

Fig. 2.2. 夢 (*yume*), Dream [written with the author's eyes closed]

The calligrams we are going to channel our attention towards in the following paragraphs are two instances of the same word: 夢 (*yume*), meaning "dream".

The concept of "dream" has been regularly used within Buddhist works, particularly within the Zen philosophy, because the world, the reality we live in is oftentimes seen as nothing but a dream (see Sato 2013, 42). Similar to a dream, life is fleeting and predestined to meet its end. In everyday life, dreams occur on a regular basis; be it dreams during sleep or dreams as goals and aspirations, we, as humans, are permanently in contact with this word and its meaning. Dreams, regardless of their feasibility, can be a source of joy and happiness, as they indicate an ideal situation or our deepest desires. However, just like life, dreams are extremely fragile and evanescent, as they can shatter in an instant (see Bunyū 1982, 18). This connection between life and dreams has been a theme for mediation for many Zen practitioners, numerous masters, monks, poets and artists who have made the ideogram the center 夢 of their works.

The two calligrams representing "dream" have been written in the cursive style 草書 (*sōsho*). A primary particularity of this script is the fast movement of the brush (see Tingyou 2003, 16), as sometimes the *kanji*'s strokes are simplified, in order to allow a smoother transition between the component radicals of the ideogram. This feature is visible in the case of both representations of the word 夢, as the brush movement is visible to the observer and certain components have been simplified in order to create a smooth result.

In the case of Fig. 2.1, 夢 written with the artist's eyes opened, although the harmonious composition reveals ample, fluid brush movements, the frequency and the intensity of *kasure* elements creates a vivid image of the numerous factors that surround us, the tumultuous contact with the world realised through the act of seeing. The visual component is thus closely linked not only to the meaning of the word, but also to the Zen philosophy.

However, in the case of Fig. 2.2, 夢 written with the artist's eyes closed, the viewer can sense stillness, a subtle peace of mind that flows within the black ink. The calligram reflects the inner peace of someone who is deeply connected with their spirituality and inner self, revealing the Zen vision on discovering reality as it is. It is often said that one is able to see more with their eyes closed and the calligrapher illustrates this saying through serene brush strokes and defined movements.

By closing her eyes while writing, the artist evades some of the rules of the posture while writing, nonetheless this empty space is filled by the symbolism and the result acquired by the act of obstructing one of the senses while writing. The act of closing one's eyes is a symbol of the internalization of feelings. As Zen philosophy underlines, one cannot see the true world if they are bound by mundane thoughts. Without any visual distractions, Rodica Frențiu manages to transfer a great amount of *ki* into the ink, as although there was no visual contact, every element of the calligram is perfectly balanced, every stroke gracefully flows into the next, creating a harmonious result.

Writing the same word in two different manners illustrates the Zen principles of *mushin* and underlines the common symbolism behind *shodō* and Zen meditation and practices. Both components, the visual one and the linguistic one, have a strong Zen influence, as traces of its spirituality can be observed upon a closer look. Although two different instances of the same word, analyzing the calligrams through the lenses of Zen philosophy and cultural semiotics reveals subtle, yet clear, differences that may not be visible through other analysis methods.

Taking into consideration all the previously discussed facts, it becomes clear that one cannot bring forth the theme of *shodō* while completely ignoring

Zen Buddhism and the ways in which this philosophy and approach to spirituality have influenced the art of writing. As exemplified through this article, the link between the two is today as strong as it has been in the past, as Japanese calligraphy is an art form that transcends the flow of time and reinvents itself constantly, while maintaining an untouched core. *Shodō* is nowadays a bridge between modernity and tradition, anchoring in the present some of the oldest practices and writing techniques. *Sho* artists employ Zen practices when pursuing their art, not only as far as the content of the calligram and its meaning are concerned, but also through the body posture and movements that are similar to *zazen* meditation.

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