The Sky Rained with Millet and the Ghosts Wailed in the Night: An Anthropological Study of Chinese Calligraphy

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(November 1999)

Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in the subject of Social Anthropology

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The mythical four-eyed being Cang Jie intensively observed, above, the course of celestial stars and, underneath, the grains and claw prints of tortoises and birds. He then created written characters from the observed rules of natural beauty and rhythm. The moment when writing was invented, the sky rained with millet and the ghosts wailed in the night (tian yusu, gui yeku) in response to this earth-shaking incident. It marked the beginning of a new channel of communication between heaven and earth.

(Wang Chong, *Lun heng*)

ABSTRACT

This thesis accounts for the social power of calligraphy in China. It begins by examining the phenomena of widespread public calligraphy and inscription. I investigate three dimensions of Chinese calligraphy - as written characters, as handwriting and as an art form. I examine both the popular view of writing, and the theological view of calligraphic experts. The main points of my argument are:

1. Handwriting is considered an extension of the body-person (*shen*), which makes it a suitable candidate for the Chinese love of reading 'signs' from bodily forms. As a result, handwriting is treated as revelatory of the inner self.

2. The process of learning calligraphy as a 'technique of the body' constitutes an important element in Chinese embodiment. The techniques of the brush create the type of body-person that is classified as a literati.

3. One key chapter in the dissertation focuses on Bloch's criticism of Goody's 'literacy thesis' - that better means of writing transmit knowledge more effectively. To show the fallacy of Goody's assumption, Bloch resorts to the common view of ideograms - Chinese written characters are the repository of knowledge, rather than a mere means of communication. However, analysis of material from the fields of linguistics and the modern Chinese script reform shows that Bloch's assumption is a myth. Notwithstanding, it is a myth embraced by the Chinese themselves. In this folk understanding, written characters are indeed believed to contain in themselves profound information.

4. To disenchant Chinese calligraphy, the relationship between writing techniques and magic is analysed. This explains the phenomenon of 'magical' writings by political leaders. Moreover, writing is also the way socio-political power speaks. This has undoubtedly helped to sustain calligraphy's halo. However, the power of calligraphy cannot be truly understood unless one sees calligraphy - a culturally enriched and empowered category of artefact/artwork - as an active social actor with agency of its own.

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Notes on the Texts

Chinese Characters and Romanisation

Most Chinese terms and words are written in Mandarin, romanised according to the *pinyin* system, and typed in italics. Kunming dialect terms - also typed in italics and indicated as being Kunming dialect - are written according to my own phonetic improvisation. When Chinese characters are included, they are generally shown using the simplified character form as used in the PRC. The only exception is when comparison with the unsimplified version is needed.

Translation

The translation of classic texts on calligraphy is my own, unless otherwise indicated.

Illustrations

Wherever possible, an illustration is included immediately after the paragraph in which reference is made to it for the first time. Otherwise, they are located at the end of the chapter. Reference to any illustration is indicated in the following manner: Fig. [chapter number. illustration number].

1. Introduction: The Abode of Calligraphic Inscriptions

1.1 Power does not Speak; It Writes

The intimate link between political leadership and calligraphy or written words is widely recognized as a fact in Imperial China (Ledderose 1979; 1986; Kraus 1991:36-44; Rawson 1992; Leys 1996; Zito 1997). As Jenner forcefully puts it, "[In China,] emperors and mandarins communicate their wishes through the written word. They issue orders or instruct their subjects; they do not cast their dignity aside to speak in public. In China power does not speak - it writes" (Jenner 1992:184). This tendency survives into modern-day China. Simon de Beaufort observes that "important speeches made by national leaders are really meant to be read, not spoken... [I]n fact, they are seldom transmitted "live" to the populace" (de Beaufort 1978:51). There is an easily noticeable preference of the written over the spoken. As a consequence, "Political speech is not only thought of as primarily a written text; it must also be made available, if only in its most vital passages, in the author's original calligraphy. Modern technology has developed and multiplied the old techniques of facsimile, but one witnesses the same popular reverence, and the same yearning as in the past, for replicas, of the rulers' edicts, directives, or mottos in their own calligraphy" (de Beaufort 1978:52). In fact, good (brush) handwriting was "the prerequisite to climb the ladder of political career. [And] until recently, no Chinese statesman could truly command respect without being also master of the brush; social prestige as well as intellectual and artistic reputation could not be secured without a skilful handwriting" (Leys 1996). Similarly, in popular religion, "Written material was thoroughly incorporated into ceremonial and religious activities; indeed, the written work was in itself often an object of religious veneration" (| M. Cohen, quoted in Yan 1996:51). And "written prayers were generally considered more efficacious than spoken prayers, just as written charms were more powerful than mere incantation" (Smith 1991:201).

The political power of written words can also be found in its integrative force. It is almost a truism to say that the unified writing system plays a significant role in keeping the Chinese people, who otherwise diversify in languages as well as in regional customs, under

one political entity[1] (see Anderson 1983; Smith 1991:6; Hannas 1997). Since the Chinese written script became standardised in the third century B.C., "Chinese characters could be read by any literate person, regardless of how they might have been pronounced, thus providing extraordinary continuity across space as well as over time" (Smith 1991:6). The unifying force of the Chinese written language is also seen as an essential factor "working for the integration of elite culture" (Rawski 1985:12-3). However, the integrative power is not restricted to written words alone. Writing as art, i.e., calligraphy, also accounts for the cohesiveness of China, at least at the elite stratum (Ledderose 1986). "The aesthetic and stylistic unity within the calligraphic tradition both reflected and confirmed the social coherence of the educated elite... Along with political, economical, ideological, and other factors, calligraphy was an important means of self-identification for the ruling class, and supported its social unity" (Ledderose 1979:3).[2] In Chinese history, the majority of celebrated calligraphers were members of the politically powerful, educated elite. Examples of this will pop up throughout the whole thesis. The other side of the coin is that "Every one who aspired to government office had to be a proficient calligrapher; calligraphy therefore was the art form that was most widely practised in China" (Ledderose 1979:3).

Faced with such a firmly established emblem of power and its association with the elite culture, the reactions from the Communist revolutionaries were understandably ambivalent. In fact, the tradition of calligraphy was, rather than banished as feudal, adapted to fit "the needs of a modernizing and Leninist society" (Kraus 1991:x). Chinese calligraphy, as Kraus argues, is a cogent example of how revolutionary China, like any other nation, preserves and reinvigorates parts of its tradition when confronted with the challenging task of updating its cultural contents. Calligraphy was given a new role in revolutionary China. This was seen in the propagandistic mass media and the public calligraphic performances by political leaders, as will be discussed soon. In other words, the umbilical cord between calligraphy and power in China has not been severed in the tempestuous history of modern

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[1] When comparing book markets in China and Europe between the fifteen to eighteenth centuries, Rawski point out that the Chinese book market was not subdivided into different vernaculars as was the case in Europe. The standardised and unified written language used throughout the entire Chinese empire was one of the major causes for the much larger book market in China than in Europe then (Rawski 1985:21).

[2] Three characteristics of Chinese calligraphy are identified to have served to reinforce the cohesiveness among the political elite. They are "the direct rapport between viewer and artist, made possible through the factor of time and movement; the unparalleled tightness in the artistic tradition, technically, and stylistically; and the peculiar mode of handing down works of calligraphy through ages, letting them grow continuously and making art history part of the aesthetic experience" (Ledderose 1986:49).

China. While the Communist elites enjoyed reciting poems and wielding brushes, the political significance of calligraphy was also pushed to a new height.

Against this background, this thesis seeks to account for the social power that Chinese calligraphy and written characters are endowed with. I commence the investigation by looking at the phenomenon of widespread public calligraphy.

1.2 Covered in Brushstrokes: The First Encounter with Social Calligraphy

The traces of brushstroke by prominent figures can be seen everywhere in China. From rocks at scenic spots to the façades of public buildings, the calligraphy of influential people is used for adornment and inspiration. On a cliff in the Stone Forest [a natural wonder in Yunnan consisting eighty hectares of karst limestone pillars in fantastic shapes] are carved the two characters '*Shi Lin* (Stone Forest)' by Long Yun. He was once Yunnan's warlord governor, later accepting a position in Beijing after the Communist takeover in 1949. In every temple, one expects to find a horizontal inscribed board above the gate, poems written in brush calligraphy on columns and walls by people of different times. In parks, inscriptions are scattered in pavilions, on the ends of arched bridges and at a variety of viewpoints. These are often the names of the architectural locations, composed of four-character phrases or poetic verses inspired by the surrounding atmosphere or natural beauty. Within the Imperial City and the Forbidden City, the "doorways to all buildings were named and often marked with imperial calligraphy on the lintels" (Zito 1997:139). In fact, the inscriptions have become scenery in their own right (Fig.1.1). Calligraphic inscriptions are so common in China that they have long submerged into the silent background of people's lives. In imperial times, literati were free to wield their brushes and leave poems of appreciation on walls whenever inspiration arose. Thereby, natural beauty is rarely unaccompanied by carved odes from exhilarated hearts. On the private level, when new shops or buildings are opened, boards inscribed by beautiful or "famous hands (*mingshou*, or *mingjia*)" are hung at the entrance to mark the beginning of business or organization. On the national level, the launching of new publications and architectural projects are also

adorned with calligraphy by influential figures.[3]

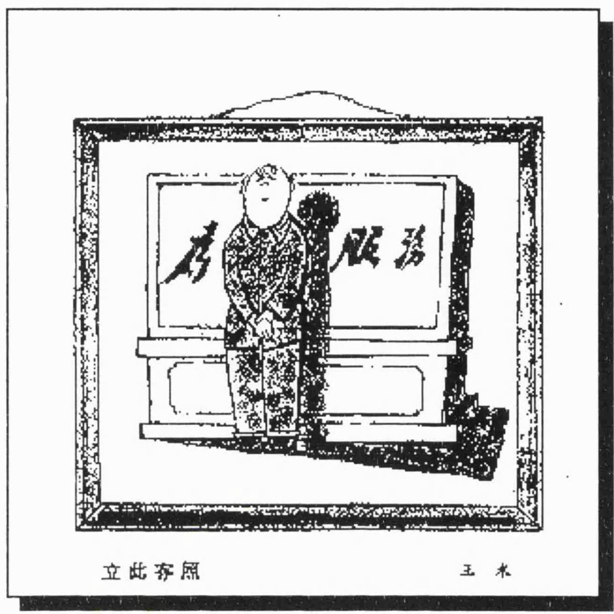

Fig. 1.1 Taking a photograph in front of Mao's inscription - To Serve the People. (Source: *Fengci yu youmo*, 1983).

Calligraphic inscriptions by paramount political leaders are also found on newspapers and journals as mastheads. As mentioned earlier, calligraphy was not abolished as feudal after the party took power. Instead, influential political figures scattered their calligraphic writing all over the country. Nearly every newspaper and magazine prints its title in the hand of a political patron. For example, Mao inscribed the masthead for the national newspaper People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*). These calligraphic characters have been circulated across the country along with the newspaper ever since. Mao's calligraphy can also be seen on all newspapers of provincial level and upwards as mastheads,[4] such as *Yunnan Ribao* (Yunnan Daily) (Fig. 1.2), *Gongren Ribao* (Workers' Daily), *Guangming Ribao* (Guangming Daily), and *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (China's Youth's Newspaper), just to name a few. On the provincial level, *Yunnan Ribao* (Yunnan Daily) publishes an Overseas edition, called "Yunnan Today (*Jinri Yunnan*)". The newspaper's masthead used to be written by Gao Yan,

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[3] The names of architectural projects written by famous figures with brush and ink are later carved in stone or metal and positioned in a prominent place on the architectural structures. In the cases of shop or restaurant signs, written characters in brush and ink are engraved on wooden boards then gilded in gold, which are later hung above their entrances or on heir internal walls.

[4] Personal communication.

a previous secretary of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee (*shengwei shuji*).[5] Moreover, numerous buildings, such as the National Fine Art Academy (*Guoli meishu xueyuan*) (Liu 1992:461) and the Monument to the People's Heroes (*Renmin yingxiong jinianbei*) in Tiananmen Square (Liu 1992:478), are also adorned with Mao's flamboyant calligraphy.[6] Mao's immediate successor Chairman Hua Guofeng was also invited to leave his ink strokes on various publications. One of Hua's most famous inscriptions is the signboard for Mao's mausoleum in Tiananmen Square, "Chairman Mao Memorial Hall (*Mao zhuxi jiniantang*)" - a symbolic gesture of the secession to power (de Beaufort 1978:52-3). As Kraus perceptively observes, "A typical photograph from the Chinese press shows a leading official taking up his brush and writing an inscription before the admiring eyes of his entourage" (Kraus 1991:85). A casual look through documentary films and photographs of Chinese political or other social leaders circulated in the West is sufficient to make one appreciate this point.

Fig. 1.2 Mao's inscription for the masthead of *Yunnan Ribao*

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[5] Personal communication.

[6] Apart from his public inscriptions and newspaper mastheads, some pieces of Mao's calligraphy were used to adorn various household objects found in most people's homes (Wang & Zhang 1992:530). One of the most common household objects before the demise of Mao is a small white porcelain statuette of Mao's bust with his famous calligraphic writing "Serve the people (*wei renmin fuwu*)" in low relief on the base. These statuettes are often sold at tourist antique stands in Yunnan where Westerners or Japanese frequent. The enlarged version of the same inscription can also be found at the gates of numerous official buildings all over China. Bayne also mentions that "Since 1990, publications of calendars illustrated with archive photographs of Mao Zedong are sometimes accompanied by examples of his calligraphy" (Bayne 1998:166). Images of Mao also abound in contemporary Chinese art, as well as in fashion, throughout the late 1980s and early 90s (Hill 1999:20).

This is the first impression one is likely to have of 'social calligraphy' in China. Swamped by these omnipresent calligraphic inscriptions, one is tempted to wonder that there may be a message behind the transient ink strokes turned into permanent fixities that permeate Chinese everyday life. By 'social calligraphy', I am referring to situations when the significance of calligraphy has escaped the walled bounds of literati's studios and aestheticians' studies. In short, 'social calligraphy' refers to writing which has important social implications and which may therefore be studied anthropologically. Calligraphy subsumed under this rubric ranges from public inscriptions by famous or influential figures, to ritual calligraphy produced as talismans to ward off the harassments of evil spirits (*fu* or *fulu*), from decorative calligraphy used to adorn the domestic environment, to the private realm of handwriting, just to name a few. All these will be subjects of analysis in this dissertation.

1.2.1 Some Methodological Considerations

In spite of the prominence of the 'calligraphy phenomena' mentioned above, calligraphy as a social practice in China remains an understudied subject by anthropologists. There are two immediate explanations for this lack of interest. The first is the association of writing and high arts, under both categories of which calligraphy is subsumed, with the elite. Roughly speaking, elite and dominant cultures are not what anthropologists are interested in traditionally. Having sworn loyalty to 'popular culture', anthropologists also shy away from the voices of the elite. As a firmly established subject for art history in China (as well as in the West), calligraphy has been discussed and written about extensively. Unfortunately, this extensive body of literature on calligraphy alone is enough to render it unsuitable as an anthropological subject, at least at the first impression, mainly because textual material is seen as the voice of the elite. Taking up Chinese calligraphy as an anthropological subject does not imply that I intend to deny the tie between writing/calligraphy and the elite. Frankly, it would be a radical overcompensation lacking empirical support. Instead, I will point out reasons why the apparent association with the elite culture should not be taken as a deterrent. Firstly, one has to bear in mind that the Chinese elite[7] is a huge population on its own and deserves some anthropological attention.

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[7] This, however, raises the question of what is elite in China and what are the requirements of recruitment into the elite group. Furthermore, as Cahill rightly points out, "One must beware of making "the Chinese literati" into monolithic entities with uniform sets of opinions and biases... There were always some doubters and iconoclasts, ready to undermine the orthodox opinions" (Cahill 1994:13-4; cf. Clunas 1997:24;

Secondly and more importantly, one must take into account the channelling effect between elite and popular cultures in China which has been hinted by writers who contributed to the collected volume, *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Johnson, D.; Nathan, A. & E. Rawski 1985). In fact, the rigid separation of "elite" from "popular" beliefs and ideas has also been challenged. For instance, Brokaw's study of the ledgers of merits and demerits in Ming-Qing China suggests that "popular and elite are basically meaningless as descriptions of beliefs and ideas. That is, there are few beliefs that can, with any confidence, be tied exclusively to any one level in the social hierarchy... The presence of a belief or idea in an "elite" text does not necessarily make that belief or idea the creation of the elite. In this case, and indeed in many others, we simply do not know enough about the real origins of a belief to link it conclusively to either the people or the elite" (Brokaw 1991:239). What follows is that one should, first of all, resist the temptation to see them as distinct and exclusive of one another. Even when such distinction is unavoidable analytically, there is no reason why an investigation of so-called elite material cannot contribute to the understanding of popular culture in general. As Johnson succinctly points out, "The principal beliefs and dominant ideas that clustered around the most fearsome and fascinating aspects of human existence - the systems of traditions, precepts, information, and inspiration that we call religion, law, medicine, historiography, science, and the like - were always formulated and transmitted in ranges of related texts (oral and written), from peasant proverbs and tales to learned treaties and sophisticated narratives. To appreciate the true importance for Chinese history of a complex system of thought,... it is essential to study all the versions of it that were produced" (Johnson 1985:72). Therefore, the social significance of calligraphy (and writing) in China can be and should be investigated from multiple perspectives. These include how it is perceived by the non-elite and how the non-elite interact with and live in a tradition in which writing/calligraphy is a primary concern, as well as how it is seen by the elite, most directly manifested in the extensive collection of treatises on calligraphy. In other words, there is no reason why the impressive amount of text on calligraphy should be taken as a deterrent to anthropological investigation, instead it should be viewed as an enriching raw material.

Moreover, what the text on calligraphy offers is precisely what we call 'native self-

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Esherick & Rankin 1993).

interpretations' or 'native self-critiques' (Yang 1994:28), albeit by a specific fraction of the society. As Mayfair Yang (1994:25-45) points out, the task of anthropologists involves not only to extract knowledge (verbal as well as practical) from the average native practitioners and informants, but also to engage with the thoughts of native thinkers. In other words, by taking this body of literature into account, the natives are treated as producers of knowledge (Said 1979; Yang 1994; Marcus & Fischer 1986).[8] As a result, I want to stress that, in the dissertation, I am as interested in the 'popular' view of writing as in the 'theological' view of calligraphic experts and the texts they have produced.

Another reason for the lack of anthropological interest in calligraphy is that it may appear too linguistically and aesthetically complicated for non-Chinese scholars to study. In fact, this is not a suspicion reserved for non-Chinese academics only. Many calligraphy experts I interviewed during fieldwork expressed their unreserved suspicion of my ability to introduce Chinese calligraphy to Western readers. They, without exception, regarded me as too young to grasp the depth and subtlety of calligraphic knowledge. Whether this is the case is a judgement reserved for the reader to make.

Related to the problem of disciplinary tradition, two issues from the literature on the relationship between calligraphy and political power also need to be addressed here. Firstly, it is almost a received wisdom, therefore often unchallenged, to say that Chinese calligraphy has long been practised by and associated with the ruling class, hence the political power. These works have done very well to establish the link. However, what they failed to address is the mechanism through which the link is established. This is not to discredit this body of intellectual efforts, but to open up another horizon of investigation that will enrich the overall understanding of the place of writing/calligraphy in Chinese society. One of the aims of this thesis is to help generate that horizon with the help of anthropological tradition and knowledge, which is characterised by its attention to everyday practices and popular discourses. Secondly, there is a marked tendency towards intellectual fissure in the study of

[8] Yang (1994) argues further that the understanding of the Other should not be reduced to a cultural self-critique of the West. This position renders anthropology "insensitive to issues and concerns that arise out of native experience and native self-understanding" (ibid.:32). However, care has to be taken while using text as native self-interpretation/self-critique. Anthropology as an academic discipline requires, to some extent, an interpretation/critique of the native self-interpretation/self-critique. This trade prerequisite means that it inevitably places itself at a meta-level of understanding in relation to the native version of knowledge.

Chinese calligraphy. In the West, Chinese calligraphy is usually the intellectual territory of art historians (e.g., Sullivan 1974; Chaves 1977; Willetts 1981; Hay 1983a; Nakata 1983; Fu 1986; Billeter 1990; Murck & Fong 1991; Chang & Miller 1991; Rawson 1992; Tseng 1993; Struman 1997; McNair 1998, etc.). In the few cases where social scientists have taken a interest in the subject, it is with entirely different research interests and intellectual agenda in mind. There is however one small and emerging strand of research within art historical tradition that promises dialogue between the two divergent disciplines, i.e., the social history of Chinese calligraphy (Wang 1995; Ledderose 1986; McNair 1998; Cahill 1994; cf. Kraus 1991; cf. Clunas 1991).[9] The other potential source for inter-disciplinary communication is the anecdotes about the lives of calligraphers and the society in large. This body of information is often scattered in conventional writing about Chinese calligraphy and informal historical archives such as letters or inscriptions on paintings. Stranded by distinct primary concerns - art historians on the aesthetics and techniques, and social scientists on the political power and economic contexts - the intellectual flowers of the two disciplines await to be cross-bred. Therefore, I see it as one of the aims of this thesis to facilitate the dialogue between the two disciplines.[10]

1.2.2 Fieldwork and Sources of Material

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, from January to December of 1995, and later from February to April in 1998. One month in 1998 was spent in Dali, a small town in Yunnan, about 400 kilometres from Kunming. Soon after I arrived in Kunming, I began to realize that fieldwork in China was impossible without a network of connections. Starting from two families I got to know very well, I was gradually introduced to most of their relatives in the city and most of the friends

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[9] Cahill (1994) points out that there has been a widespread convention to see traditional Chinese art (painting or calligraphy etc.) as pure personal expression among art historians, both Chinese and Western. This attitude results in the de-emphasizing of most other factors, social or economic, that motivated the production of artwork. This is mainly because Western art historians on Chinese art are not always aware of the extent to which they are writing under the framework of reproducing the ideology or "myth" created by the Chinese literati themselves. In this myth, artists are presented as totally disinterested in worldly concerns, and their art is seen as an expression of artists' lofty ideas uncontaminated by any social motivations. This situation was perfectly paralleled in the world of calligraphy. Against this general tide of de-contextualization, Cahill, among the recent trend to look at the social history of arts, attempts to situate the production of painting in traditional China within the matrix of economic and social contexts.

[10] Another reason for this borrowing of force from two distinct disciplines concerns the seeing of artwork from both the institutional and the individual points of view. This will be explained later in this chapter.

of a girl I became particularly close to. With the personal network the families helped me build up, I was able to arrange interviews with people I would never have been able to, and gained access to libraries which I would not have been able to without them introducing me as a distant relative.

As a whole, the material used in this thesis comes from three major sources. The first one, obviously, is the existing body of written literature on calligraphy. The second source is the speech and writing on calligraphy by calligraphy specialists, by which I refer to practising calligraphers recognised by the society[11] and calligraphy aficionados who devote a big chunk of their leisure time to the practice and study of calligraphy as a hobby. The third category is the everyday speech and activities of ordinary people who have no special interest in either calligraphy or Chinese writing as such. A few of them were illiterate. People who are classified into this category showed different degrees of interest in calligraphy. But most of them could talk about it casually based on their experience with handling the brush while growing up. Most of them would at least read or hear about comments on calligraphy by specialists in either everyday life or on popular media from time to time. As a result, a fairly large collection of direct speech by this category of people is presented in the thesis with minimum editing, apart from what is involved in the translation from Mandarin or Kunming dialect into English. I should point out briefly that I was able to take detailed notes during conversations with my informants (specialists and non-specialists) for two reasons. Firstly, calligraphy specialists tended to be very proud that I was taking note of what they said just as a respectful student would do. Secondly, the non-specialists I quote extensively throughout the thesis are ones whom I became very close to in the course of fieldwork. They did not mind me taking notes in front of them at all. Some of them were even, like the specialists, flattered by the importance of their own words, which they inferred from my note-taking. This, according to some of my informants, also prompted them to speak more than they would have done.

The first two sources of material have been widely used in previous studies on Chinese calligraphy. However, the third one has been, by and large, ignored by writers on this subject. The source material is, admittedly, limited by the very nature of anthropological

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[11] For example, members of the calligrapher associations, calligrapher's who works have won various awards, or people who are simply renowned as calligraphers in the society.

fieldwork. Nevertheless, I believe that extra strength is derived from the inclusion of information about how ordinary people, literate and illiterate, talk about and participate in a socio-cultural milieu permeated by both calligraphic and utility writing.

1.2.3 The Gender Issue

Another very important point is related to gender. Most calligraphy specialists I talked to were male, although I did come across a few women who were very enthusiastic about and adept in calligraphy. In historical terms, men have also dominated the field. This can be at least partially attributed to the fact that they had been the only players in the governing-official system in imperial China (see chapter 5). However, historical records show that females were not excluded from the prestige gained by accomplishments in calligraphy (see chapter 5, footnote 23). Furthermore, in contemporary China, there is no significant gender difference related to the type of calligraphic knowledge or related achievements. Apart from specialists, other categories of my informants are equally distributed in terms of gender.

As one of the fundamental organising principles of human experience in all societies, the importance of gender in social analysis cannot be overstated. In relation to this dissertation, several gender-related questions can be asked: Is the Chinese female personhood constituted differently from that of the male, especially in relation to the material discussed here? Are the learning processes and the related ideology of calligraphy different for men and women? Does the aura, or the social power of calligraphy, work differently for women calligraphers? Does the calligraphy by women follow a different set of principles when it is woven into the Chinese social fabric? Do men and women have different relationships with writing? These are important questions and can enrich the discussions in this dissertation. However, due to space and time limitations they are not properly dealt with. I nevertheless see them as a potential future project to pursue.

Reverting to the issue of 'social calligraphy', among all the examples of what I call 'social calligraphy', the most striking one is perhaps the category of 'public calligraphy', i.e., the writing of inscriptions in public spaces by famous people, simply because it tends to strike an outsider as interestingly bizarre. Can one imagine British Prime Minister or American President touring Britain or the U.S. and sprinkling their handwriting on buildings

or natural landscape? This peculiar phenomena is even more striking for its sheer scale - it is done by perhaps all the provincial governors, county governors, mayors, and many other socially influential figures (their respective influence is of different scale) all over China. As we will soon see, public inscription also has political uses, and is a measure of political power and fame. For this reason, I shall commence the investigation of the 'social calligraphy' from the category of public calligraphy (*tizi*).

1.3 Public Calligraphy (*tizi*)

Tizi means to write a few words for the purpose of highlighting something for private or public view. These few words can be written on buildings, paintings, books, in fact, practically anything. The content of *tizi* is varied, ranging from something as simple as the title of a book, the name of a building or the signature of the person, to a literary prose of encouragement, appreciation or commentary. What is central to *tizi* is that these words are intended to be seen and read by people other than the person who writes it. For this reason, I shall call *tizi* 'public calligraphy' in this dissertation. The common translation of *tizi* as 'inscription' is also used sometimes as an interchangeable term. There are many ways in which *tizi* can be embroiled into the functioning of the social fabric of the PRC. By pointing out how *tizi* works in, and is used to work the system, I hope to show that *tizi* is a social matter, as well as an artistic one - as most literary Chinese would think. This opens up a whole dimension of calligraphy/writing as a phenomenon pregnant with socio-anthropological significance.

1.3.1 Public Calligraphy as an Instrument of Propaganda

In the People's Republic of China, the genteel art of Chinese calligraphy has been reshaped and turned into an instrument of propaganda. Political leaders of all levels, when they pay an official visit to an institution, are often asked to 'write a few characters (*xie jige zi*, *zi* means written characters or handwriting[12])' for the host institute[13]. The content of their

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[12] Nuances of the meaning of the term, *zi*, will be discussed later.

[13] The host institution can be a school, a factory, a hospital. Chen Lifu, a Minister of Education during the Republican era, reminisced that when he visited schools of all levels, host institutions often had brush and ink prepared and asked him to write a few characters (*ti jige zi*). As a result, his inscriptions could be found all over China. However, they were all burnt under Mao's instruction during the Cultural Revolution (*Zhongyang Ribao*, September 4, 1999).

calligraphic gifts are often political messages coherent with the Party's policies on various fields. These calligraphic inscriptions are then properly mounted and displayed in prominent locations in either the workplace or public spaces. Often, political leaders also endorse party projects by 'writing a few characters' on the projects.[14] For example, Mao wrote "Heighten our vigilance and eliminate all spies; Prevent bias and wrong no innocent person" for the proposal of the Elimination of Counter-Revolutionaries Project raised in the Supreme State Conference in 1955 (Wang & Zhang 1992:521). As part of his project to modernize China, Deng Xiaoping set forth to reform the education system. For this project, he wrote "Education must face modernisation, face the world and face the future." (Fig. 1.3) This piece of calligraphy was given to a school as a gift.[15]

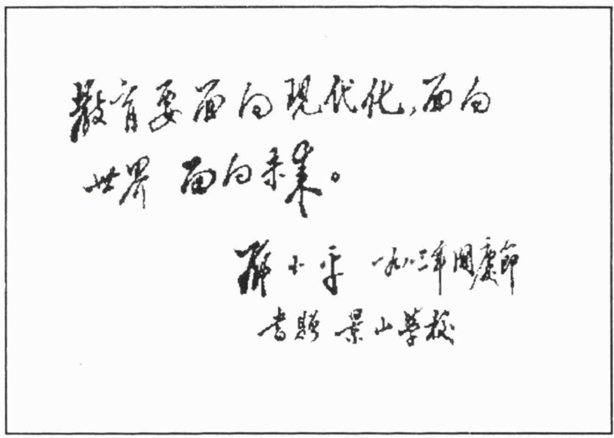

Fig. 1.3 Deng Xiaoping's inscription "Education must face modernisation, face the world and face the future".

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[14] However, calligraphic inscriptions by political leaders, given their relatively smaller sizes, are less prominently displayed than banners with hand-written or, more often, printed slogans to publicize or promote official policies. Anyone who has been to China could not fail to notice the omnipresence of banners with slogans in both urban and rural settings. Before Kunming hosted the Fifth National Minority Nationalities' Traditional Sports Games in 1995, an enormous white banner was seen cascading down the façade of the Workers' Cultural Palace, a modern high-rise building at the very centre of the city. The slogan read 'Play a good host; Run a successful games (*danghao dongdaozhu, banhao minyunhui*)'. Hung across the foot bridges on the main road were printed slogan banners reading 'Develop ethnic sports; Strengthen ethnic solidarity.' or 'Develop ethnic sports; Build the great mother land.' In March 1998 when I was travelling in Yunnan province, red banners with slogans written in brush calligraphy were in virtually every village. Then, the most commonly seen slogans were about the policies of population control and wiping out adult illiteracy, phrased in sentences such as "The best way to affluence is to have less babies" and "To eliminate adult illiteracy is the fundamental education policy of the nation". Through these slogan banners, the messages from the top of local government are pronounced unambiguously and are supposed to infiltrate the mind of the people. Underlying these slogans is the assumption that by seeing these politically correct and often educational messages everyday, the public can be transformed in a way desired by the government.

[15] *People's Daily*, 18 February 1998.

It is also the tradition of Communist Party leaders to *tizi* for the memorial halls of revolutionary heroes and martyrs. For example, the inscription on the Monument to the People's Heroes at TiananmenSquare was composed and written by Chairman Mao on the eve of the founding of the PRC. And in the Northeast Revolutionary Martyrs' Memorial Hall, Premier Zhou Enlai's wrote "Eternal glory to the revolutionary martyrs!" In 1977, to carry on Mao's legacy in a symbolic manner after his death, Chairman Hua Guofeng followed his example and tried to shore up his claim to succeed Mao by leaving a frenzy of inscriptions all over the country. He left his calligraphic handwriting on two memorial towers and stele in Jiangxi province and a memorial hall in Hebei province to mark three significant revolutionary insurrections during the communists' fight for power (Fig 1.4).[16] In 1977, Hua also wrote "Learn from Lei Feng; Carry through to the end our proletarian revolutionary cause pioneered by Chairman Mao" to display his determination to follow Mao's path.[17] The official comment on this act of Hua's is, "The fact that Chairman Hua inscribed for the memory of the revolution is a vivid expression of the sage leader's profound affection for the older generation of proletarian revolutionaries. It also embodies the leader's determination to carry Chairman Mao's great cause to the end."[18] Numerous other politicians in the PRC have hand-copied Mao's poems and quotations in brush calligraphy to show their loyalty to him.[19] It is also customary for communist elites to write inscriptions for the funerals of their revolutionary comrades, although the practice also existed before and exists outside the communist regime. After Nie Er (called 'People's musician' because he wrote songs about the hard-working proletariat filled with revolutionary combative spirit) drowned in Japan at the age of twenty-four, Guo Moruo[20] wrote an inscription for him, honouring him as "the bugle of China's revolution; the drum of People's Liberation".[21] More dramatically, in 1976, the death of widely loved Premier Zhou plunged many people into deep grief and eruptive rage against the Gang of Four.[22] Guo Moruo, bed-ridden at the time and distraught with anger and grief, picked up his brush and wrote a famous poem in

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[16] *Gemin Wenwu*, 1979(5):44.

[17] *Gemin Wenwu*, 1978(1):5. Mao was the first to advocate Lei Feng's selfless revolutionary spirit.

[18] *Gemin Wenwu*, 1978(1):7.

[19] *Gemin Wenwu*, 1977 (4). This includes Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Ye Jianying, Kang Sheng and Guo Moruo, just to mention a few.

[20] A celebrated scholar who is also the former head of the Academy of Sciences. He is renowned for his readiness to *tizi* for all sorts of occasions.

[21] *Gemin Wenwu*, 1980(5):26-30.

[22] Together with Jiang Qing, Mao's last wife, the Gang of Four (*siren bang*) are held responsible for the destruction during the Cultural Revolution.

memory of Zhou, "His great virtue shall be forever remembered among the people; His achievements shall continue through centuries. His loyalty shines glaringly alongside the sun; Never dies under the sky and never buried beneath the earth."[23]

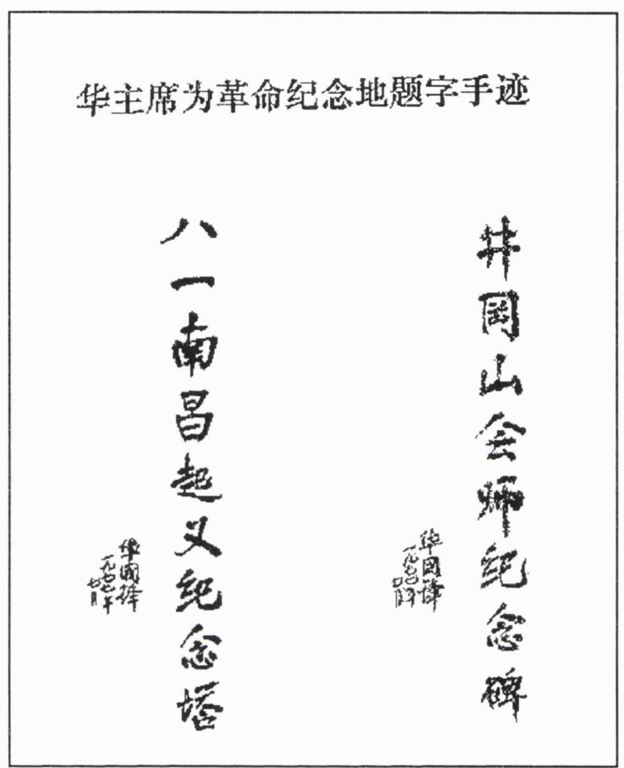

Fig. 1.4 Hua's inscriptions (Source: *Gemin Wenwu* 1978(1):6).

1.3.2 Public Calligraphy as Political Barometer

Public calligraphy does not only serve the propagation of propaganda, it also works as a political barometer. As indicated earlier, one of the social functions of celebrity calligraphy is to display patronage by influential people. This is particularly true in the case of newspaper mastheads or magazine titles (we saw the examples by Mao earlier). These celebrity inscriptions serve to "delineate networks of patronage that might otherwise remain invisible" (Kraus 1991:12). In years of stability, celebrity inscriptions add frill to the favoured establishment. Whereas, during political upheavals, backstage support in the form of calligraphy works like a handwritten certificate for relative freedom and authority of expression. As a result, the calligraphic writing of patrons who have fallen out of favour in the rough sea of modern Chinese politics is in equal disfavour. It is often erased from

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[23] *Gemin Wenwu*, 1978(5):25-36. See also *Gemin Wenwu* 1979(1):36-41; 1979 (2):42-47.

magazine covers or simply replaced by another glamorous hand still in power. In other words, the change of inscribed title is often an extempore record of the rise and fall of the careers of these public figures. This can also be applied to celebrity inscriptions displayed in public spaces. More importantly, people actually read these inscriptions as political messages. I was told by a young man in his late twenties working for a provincial newspaper about this incident that happened in 1988 (or 89?), when he was about 19 years old.

> "The Kunming *Gongren Wenhua Gong* (Workers' Cultural Palace) used to be called Kunming *Renmin Wenhua Gong* (People's Cultural Palace). The name was inscribed by Hu Yaobang. He was dismissed from his post in the party in 1987 (*zhanting dangnei zhiwu*). I remember, once in our politics class, a classmate of mine asked our teacher whether Hu's inscription would be scrapped off from the façade of the People's Cultural Palace. He was told off by the teacher because he was not supposed to comment on such things. Thinking about it now, we were all very sensitive to these sorts of ups and downs of political figures - the coming to and falling out of the centre of power. So we looked for signs of it. Public inscription is one of them. It is something you can see for yourself. But I am not sure whether it's still Hu's inscription on the façade of the Workers' Cultural Palace now. After the era of constant political upheavals, we no longer paid much attention to those written characters."

In this case, the enormous carved metal characters on a prominent public building in Kunming was believed to be indicative of the political climate of the central government in Beijing in the eyes of a teenager. The subtle change in the familiar environment was read by the young lad as a message that accompanied the vicissitude of political environ, even though he was told not to concern himself with such matters. Often, the calligraphic presence of an influential figure was simply scraped off or dismantled once his influence had waned. A few years later, perhaps not many people would remember that the calligraphic presence of an once-powerful political figure used to exhibit itself at the very centre of the city.[24] This raises the question of how public memory is shaped and who is responsible for it. Further research is necessary to provide an answer to this question.

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[24] The Cultural Palace used to be one of the most prominent high-rise buildings in the urba landscape of Kunming before the arrival of the age of 'buildings to impress', which started from the beginning of the nineties. It is situated right next to the central square (*dongfeng guangchang*) of the city, where a lot of people, including tourists and locals, gather for morning exercises and special celebrational activities. The visual prominence of the building explains why people cannot but notice the calligraphic inscription on it. Gradually, more and more impressive high-rise buildings, each with their own calligraphic inscriptions, were built in the area immediately surrounding the Cultural Palace. As a result, the building's visual prominence dwindled from people's view, together with its calligraphic inscription. This may contribute to, together with growing indifference to the political climate, people's inattention to those characters.

1.3.3 Tizi as Tokens Indicative of Guanxi

If a restaurant owner is asked why s/he would pay to have calligraphy by influential people displayed in the restaurant, s/he would tell you that it adds glamour (*zengtian guangcai*). But how does a piece of calligraphy add glamour? Most likely, it is not simply because of the artistic value of the calligraphy. Otherwise, professional calligraphers' works should be displayed instead of those by political figures. I asked one of my key informants, a young man working for a jewellery company, why people wanted to pay politicians in power to write inscriptions for their shop or restaurant signs. He replied promptly,

> "Normally, it is those management work units (*jingying guanli danwei*) that tend to have inscriptions by political figures. In China, it's particularly difficult to run these work units because they are often heavily taxed. People know that they are more likely to make profit than any other types of *danwei*. If they have inscriptions from famous politicians, then they are normally treated more leniently by, for example, tax people. The business and industry tax (*gongshang shuiwu*) is like a big grey wolf (*da huilang*), biting whoever it can find (*jianshui yaoshui*). If these profit-making *danwei* have inscriptions of famous politicians, then the tax bureau (*shuiwu ju*) might not be as strict with them, which means demanding them to pay less tax... You can call this the "effect of *shangfang baojian* [the imperial sword given by the emperor, a symbol of high authority, investing the bearer with discretionary power and exoneration]".[25] It can probably protect your business to an extent. But in reality, its effect is hard to tell. This is in the case of inscriptions by politically influential figures. As to inscriptions by famous calligraphers, it is more likely to be a commercial gimmick to attract customers (*zhaolan guke*), since these calligraphers may not have the power or influence to provide the same type of protection."

If the 'calligraphic presence'[26] actually offers protection for the business, I propose, it is because it 'suggests' certain connection between the restaurant and the writer of the calligraphy. Traditionally, painting and calligraphy are often given to friends as gifts (Clunas 1997:60).[27] It is therefore indicative of a privileged communication and a degree of closeness between the artist and the recipient (Cahill 1994:34). Therefore the 'calligraphic presence' is naturally read as a token of friendship between the writer and the restaurant owner. What

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[25] Although the sword was used in imperial times and therefore already obsolete, the term *shangfang baojian* is still used in everyday speech to refer to items that endow one with similar power.

[26] I have been using the phrase 'calligraphic presence' without unpacking its meaning. When the phrase is used, I literally mean that the writer himself is present in the form of his calligraphy.

[27] Such gifts are normally not given to people who are not considered worthy by the donor. The practice is not restricted to the individual level. The state leaders of the PRC also frequently present their own calligraphic writing, properly framed or mounted on scrolls, to diplomatic visitors of other nations.

follows is that the social power of the influential writer is very likely to be mobilised, in the case of need, to the advantage of the owner of his calligraphy. In this way, the 'calligraphic presence' plants suspicion in the mind of the viewer (tax people, for example). In other words, it is a suggestive token of *guanxi*, the network of connections that propels social moves in the PRC (Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Smart 1993; King 1991). And as Yan Yunxiang points out, "The most important means for self-protection is cultivating a large *guanxi* network" (Yan 1996:97). As a result, the 'calligraphic presence' - as a suggestive token of *guanxi* - can provide a certain protection for the owner of the calligraphy. This interpretation of calligraphic presence as a suggestive token of *guanxi* also implies that the difference between influential political figures and famous calligraphers may be less significant than it appears. It is often the case that famous calligraphers tend to know more people who are socially well placed. As a result, they also have greater ability for social manoeuvre to pull strings in the time of need.

However, my informant was right to be suspicious about the actual effect of the calligraphic presence of influential figures in protecting the business, because the *guanxi* between the business owner and the hand behind the piece of calligraphy is nothing more than suggestive. In fact, there is a big market for the calligraphic inscription of influential figures and professional calligraphers alike in China. That is to say, their calligraphic presence can be commercially purchased.[28] In these cases, the *guanxi*, as well as the protection it offers, suggested through the possession of celebrity inscriptions may be illusory because the relationship may not last after the commercial transaction is closed. And this is not a contemporary phenomenon. In late imperial China, the acceptance of such paintings or calligraphy as a token of friendship, in fact, "multiplied the demand for them, spreading them far beyond the circle of people who could legitimately claim that kind of closeness and the demand was inevitably translated into market-like transactions" (Cahill 1994:34). In modern-day China, the same thing is happening. A professional calligrapher once told me,

> "The price of the *zi* (written characters) of Feng Guoyu, the most famous calligrapher in Kunming at present, for inscription is currently 350 *kuai* each

[28] An eulogistic term, *runbi* (to moisten the brush), is often used to stand for the remuneration of the calligrapher.

character. And larger characters can cost more than a thousand *kuai* each.[29]"

An art dealer in Kunming also told me,

> "Generally speaking, calligraphers are more *chixiang* (lit. eating fragrance, meaning much sought after) than painters, because their work has more commercial uses (*shangye yingyong da*). For example, their work can become the signboard (*zhaopai*) of restaurants, commercial buildings and shopping centres (*shangchang*). I'll give some examples. Seven or eight years ago, Feng Guoyu, the chairman of the calligraphers' association in Yunnan, wrote the restaurant sign for a fried-chicken restaurant, *Shangshang Jicheng*. These four characters alone brought him more than 2000 *kuai*, not to mention this was the price of seven or eight years ago. It's becoming more and more expensive now. There are plenty of people who want his *zi*. He can hardly cope with the demand. So, now, he only writes for big companies and big *danwei*. And his daughter has become his agent (*jingji ren*) to deal with public relations for him. He is also very famous in Singapore, even the Japanese like his *zi*. I happen to know some Japanese who came to Kunming, asking for his *zi*, and HIS *zi* only. They did not want anybody else's *zi*."

Sometimes, calligraphy by famous people is collected in the hope that the political value of the author rises in the future. In this way, it becomes an investment. Disregarding the financial value of the inscription, the implied connection with a powerful inscriber also provides a protective shield in time of need.

1.3.4 Public Inscription as Publicity Booster

Patronage displayed through inscription does not benefit patronees alone. It also serves as a way of self-promotion for the patron. Guo Moruo is a good example. Apart from leaving his calligraphy on various cultural institutions, temples, as well as his famous couplet at Lu Xun's funeral[30], Guo Moruo also 'added lustre and honour (*zengguang tiancai*)' with his brush to restaurant signs all over China. One can easily imagine a restaurant owner relying on the suggestive *guanxi* with Guo to boost his standing with customers. If potential protection and a certain lustre (*guangcai*) is what the restaurant owner wants from the calligrapher, what benefit does the calligrapher get apart from the monetary rewards found in some cases? Obviously, public inscription demands a certain degree of cultural prowess. Conveniently for the inscribers, restaurant signboards and façades of important buildings

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[29] 1 pound sterling≅ 12.5 *kuai* (RMB) in 1998.

[30] Lu Xun was one of the most vehement advocates of revolutionary ideas and a critical writer of classical elite tradition. As a popular writer, his most famous work includes the short story "The True Story of Ah Q (*Ah q zhengzhuan*)", in which calligraphy is treated as an emblem of elite culture.

provide a twenty-four-hour public showcase for the calligrapher's proud hand. The tradition of public calligraphy, in this sense, serves as an arena for political showmanship.[31] Even more importantly, people actually notice and sometimes comment on these calligraphic characters scattered around in the visual field of their everyday life. This is born out by what an informant said,

> "Nowadays, people who have a little fame or prestige (*shaoyou yanmian de ren*) like to leave inscriptions everywhere (*daochu tizi*), like Jiang Zemin. The title of the film The Great Decisive Battle (*Da Juezhan*, a film about a battle with the KMT government during the civil war) is inscribed by Jiang Zemin. His *zi* is ugly, even worse than some school pupils... He Zhiqiang, the previous governor of Yunnan province (*shengzhang*), used to leave inscriptions everywhere in the province too. People ask him to *tizi* because he was the most powerful man in Yunnan and he was famous, of course. Everybody in Yunnan knows his name. The name of the imposing Financial Building in the *Guanghu* Street is written by him. And he is not the only one. The previous Kunming mayor, Wang Tingshen, also left inscriptions everywhere. Neither of these two political figures' *zi* is particularly attractive. I am not the only one who says so. A lot of people feel so. Another example is Pu Chaozhu, the previous secretary of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee (*shengwei shuji*). He also leaves inscriptions everywhere. He even wrote the shop sign for a 'Rice Noodles Over the Bridge' restaurant (*guoqiao mixian*, a Yunnan specialty dish) called *Guoqiao Du* (City of Rice Noodles Over the Bridge). The restaurant is situated on the outskirts of the city, not even in the centre. Can you imagine that he even inscribed for such a place? I suppose it's because after the inscription for shop signs or building names, they often have to leave their signatures (*luokuan*) as well, everybody would know who wrote the signboard."

In fact, when a nation-wide leading political figure inscribes on a public building, the national media makes sure that the whole nation knows about it. Newspapers and television news regularly report on these events. This is how most people hear about these national events of celebrity inscription, I was told. For instance, in the February 1998, China was celebrating the centenary of Zhou Enlai with films and documentaries about his glorious, as well as virtuous, life. The celebration was reported to reach the climax when Zhou's bronze statue was unveiled in the newly built memorial hall for him. Without any surprise to the public, the five big calligraphic characters "Comrade Zhou Enlai (Zhou Enlai *tongzhi*)"

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[31] The performative aspect of public calligraphy has been pointed out to me by a few people. Kraus also remarks that to hold a brush in the hand in front of other people already puts one on stage. Surrounded by keen gaze (and perhaps an element of one's internal gaze), one is under tremendous pressure to do well (Kraus 1991:57), because failing to write good calligraphy was almost equivalent of being culturally incompetent.

written by President Jiang Zemin were engraved on the base of the statue.[32] The piece of news was later found on both national television news and all widely read national newspapers.

I asked the same informant why people liked to leave inscriptions everywhere. He told me,

> "It is all about *mingqi* [lit. name and *qi*, *qi* is a highly slippery concept in Chinese, but can be temporarily translated as airs, manner, spirit. The composite term *mingqi* is usually translated as 'fame' or 'reputation']. People want to leave their names in history (*mingliu qingshi*). Because inscribed words are fixed almost permanently, unless it's scraped off deliberately (like in the case of political figures fallen out of power), it's more likely to be passed on after one's death. If they are not thinking of such a long-term effect, then the motivation is simply the desire for *mingqi* (and sometimes money). If someone sees the inscription, he is likely to ask something about the author, thereby learning something about him. That is how your name is passed on generation after generation. That way, your name and life is more likely to be known by the public. If you then advertise your inscription a bit more, then you are even more likely to be famous and leave a trace in history."

To leave a mark in history is such a seductive idea that some people go to any lengths to have their *zi* published in newspapers or magazines dedicated to the promotion and circulation of calligraphy. If the artistic standard of their works is acceptable, it probably would not have caused much grudge. But in some cases, the *zi* comes with a written note from high officials (*di tiaozi*) so that editors sense that their opportunity for being assigned with accommodation or job promotion could be jeopardised if these *zi* were not published.[33] This type of calligraphy is called "*guanxi zi*" (calligraphy of connection)[34] (cf. Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Smart 1993; King 1991). *Guanxi zi* has become so common that it has caused a great deal of discontent among professional calligraphers (*gao shufa de ren*), who lament the degradation of the standard of professional calligraphy in

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[32] *Guangming Daily*, 17 February 1998.

[33] In her extensive study on *guanxi* in the PRC, Yang (1994:92 & 98) also mentioned the phenomena of *di tiaozi*, i.e., to pass down name slips of superiors to facilitate, as well as make sure that things will get done. The name slip may not come from a superior but from someone who has established a *guanxi* relationship with the editor. The sense of reciprocity, ethic and etiquette that propels the working of *guanxi* relationships oblige the favour-debtor (the editor in this case) to publish the calligraphy received with a note. For an insightful, as well as entertaining, description of how *guanxi* works in the PRC, see Yang 1994.

[34] *Shufa*, 1994(4):4-5.

magazines/newspapers. So far, the notion and working of *guanxi* comes into public calligraphy in two major ways. First, as mentioned earlier, public calligraphy is used to suggest the existence of *guanxi* between the calligrapher and its recipient. Second, as described here, one can mobilize *guanxi* to have one's calligraphy published in some way to boost one's *mingqi* (fame, reputation).

In brief, public calligraphy serves as a sophisticated tool for generating positive publicity. For the *mingqi*-seeking, the art of calligraphy provides a channel for silent but ubiquitous self-advertisement. Calligraphic characters are pleasant decorations for imposing glass-and-steel high-rises, as well as functional indications of shop/restaurant names. And above all, elegantly written words in brush and ink are unintrusive and subtle enough, therefore not to be confused with 'vulgar (*su*)' ways of self-promotion that are incompatible with the ideal of a Chinese gentleman. *Tizi* are indeed an allegedly subtle art of self-promotion, even though sometimes they do inadvertently attract criticism rather than admiration.

1.3.5 Calligraphy as the Ladder for Social Climbing

Calligraphy is not only a good tool for enhancing the *mingqi* and social status of those who already enjoy it. To those who do not have it already, it can often become a convenient ladder for social climbing.

The inscriber of the signboard for the Kunming Department Store (*Kunming baihuo dalou*) is a typical example of a calligraphy upstart. This imposing building is located at the very centre of the city. Before the mushrooming of modern department stores in this interior city, it was the only symbol of up-market consumerism to the people in Kunming. Even though threatened by competition from many similar stores built in recent years, it remains, together with its new extensions, one of the city's major consumer palaces. To be able to write the four huge characters *'baihuo dalou'* (the name of the building) on its façade is not a joking matter. The calligrapher of these four characters, originally a peasant from Hunan province, has made his way up to the level of *fu chuzhang* (vice-section/department chief) solely through deploying calligraphy. With a formal education level lower than junior high school (*chuzhong*), he had to grab and exploit every opportunity on his way up the social ladder. I was told his story by a practising calligrapher.

"He was a peasant from Hunan. He came to Yunnan to work as a result of the *'zhibian'* policy (placing people on the frontier), and was given a city *hukou* (household registration). At the beginning, he worked in a tree farm near Xishuang Banna (a prefecture in the south of Yunnan) in the kitchen. During his free time, he practised calligraphy (*xuezi*, lit. learning calligraphy). Once, the *lingdao* (political leader) of the Forestry Bureau went to their *danwei*, and accidentally saw his *zi*. He quite liked it, so he half-heartedly told him "Come to my home in Kunming if you get a chance". Funnily, Yang really went to the *lingdao*'s home when he came up to visit a relative, but the leader wasn't home. So Yang left. Later, he came to Kunming en route to his home town in Hunan. By a curious and fortunate coincidence, he bumped into the *lingdao* again at the bus station. Yang told the *lingdao* that he'd like to *xuexi* (learn and study). The *lingdao* once again told him half-heartedly to go and see him. So Yang actually went to stay in the guest house of the Forestry Bureau in Kunming, refusing to leave. Meanwhile, he called on the *lingdao* every now and then, which irritated the *lingdao*. So the *lingdao* decided to give Yang something to do to get rid of him. Consequently, the *lingdao* arranged for him to work in the Exhibition Room of the Forestry Bureau. While there, Yang had nothing much to do, so he practised calligraphy to kill time. He made gradual progress. Slowly, he got to know quite a few important people in Kunming. He had so much free time and his work was also linked to writing (posters for the Forestry Bureau), so he practised both at work and at home. Besides, he often went away on business, which also enriched his experience and knowledge (*jianshi*). Because of all these excellent opportunities, he made incredible progress. He was used to the flat-headed brush (oil painting brush) because he used to write posters for the Exhibition Room. Therefore, after he started using round brush (i.e., the calligraphic brush), his *zi* was endowed with distinctive features. So people liked his *zi*. The signboard of the Kunming Department Store was dismantled during the 'Down with the Four Olds (*po sijiu*)' movement. A new signboard was needed and he was asked to do the job... He has written so many signboards since that he has become rather wealthy. As a result, he has acquired a heavy stench of money (*tongchouqi zhong*). Besides, he is very hot-tempered as well, so he has made many enemies in the calligraphy community in Kunming. As a consequence, he left Kunming to establish a calligraphy college, and became the president of the college."

For some people, calligraphy is a fast track to fame, if no other tracks are available. As long as you can have your *zi* and name squeezed into the pages of newspaper, your image on the television screen or your voice on the radio, then you can easily join an exclusive club (*xiehui*) of some sort. This way, you can comfortably move up to the rank of local celebrity and become 'a person of face (*you yanmian de ren*)'. That is not all, you can then transform the prestige value of fame/*yanmian* into monetary value in the calligraphy market.

1.4 Art or Not: It is a Matter of Social Manipulation

Although celebrities in China are often pressured to write a few words (*xie jige zi*) in public, not every public figure is capable of producing fine calligraphy. One of my informants said, he did not think the *zi* of any of the political figures he mentioned was good. In fact, he called them "very ugly (*hen nanqiao*)". Most certainly, if a public figure is leaving inscriptions everywhere, s/he is obliged to command a certain degree of calligraphic finesse. Otherwise, s/he would be making a fool of her/himself in public. To meet the demand of unexpected challenges, s/he may practice hard on a fixed repertoire of phrases and characters, in case occasions arise when s/he cannot afford to upset the yearning eyes of an admiring crowd. Or, some simply use ghost-calligraphers (Kraus 1991:87; cf. Cahill 1994). I was told this joke by my informant who works in a jewellery company.

> "These people don't necessarily write that well. Some might just keep practising a limited repertoire of characters so that they can meet the demand of public inscription. There is a joke going around in Kunming. It goes like this. There were a few people taking part in a calligraphy competition. Among them only one has a high official post (*guan jiao da*). Do you know what he wrote in the competition? The two characters "*tong yi* (meaning agreed or approved)". People asked him why he wrote these two characters. His reply was that because he had to write these two characters many times a day, so he was best at writing them among all characters. This is what those high officials (*daguan*) do. They probably can't really write very well at all. But they keep practising the same few characters, so they can write these characters particularly well. It's like one's signature. Generally speaking, one normally writes one's name rather well."

There is obviously common suspicion of the general artistic quality of the public inscriptions written by influential figures. To understand the dynamics behind the socially charged phenomenon of public inscription, we must understand some basic issues. These include the distinction between *xiezi* (utility writing) and *shufa* (artistic writing), and the larger question of what makes writing 'art'. These matters can be discussed in relation to general (i.e., non-China, non-cultural specific) theories of what makes art art.

1.4.1 Art or Non-art: A Question to the Native Chinese

The Chinese term *shufa*, usually translated into English as 'calligraphy', literally means the method or principle of writing in Chinese, which is seemingly irrelevant to the notion of art. However, Chinese *shufa* has not just been regarded as one of the highest form

of art in China. Indeed, "the most valued art treasures in China have historically been examples of writing of certain aristocratsof the fourth century CE, including casual notes exchanged between them" (Clunas 1997:135). As well as being widely regarded as art in its own right, it is also argued to be fundamental to other branches, such as painting, architecture. "So fundamental is the place of calligraphy in Chinese art as a study of form and rhythm in the abstract that we may say that it has provided the Chinese people with a basic aesthetics, and it is through calligraphy that the Chinese have learned their basic notion of line and form... In the lines and composition of Chinese painting and in the forms and structures of Chinese architecture, we are able to recognize the principles developed from Chinese calligraphy" (Lin 1939:274-81; cf. Chiang 1954; Wang 1989; Zeng 1988).

Despite the firm position of calligraphy in the domain of Chinese high arts, it remains essentially a form of writing. This is manifested by the fact that almost all books on the history of Chinese calligraphy start with a chapter on the origin of writing (Chiang 1954; Chen 1993; Dong 1993; Feng 1989; Willetts 1958, etc.). It is this duality of Chinese calligraphy - writing versus fine art - that endows it with an unusual potential for political manoeuvre. In general, hand-written characters fall on the continuum of refined art on the one end and crudely formed characters untouched by any aesthetic heritage on the other. What are the parameters that determine the location of a specific piece of writing on the continuum? What makes a piece of writing in brush and ink art?

Two key terms are at issue here, *xiezi* and *shufa*. When writing in the most practical sense of the term is referred to, the term *xiezi* is used. It literally means 'to write written characters'. The term is composed of two characters. '*Xie*', a verb, means to write. The second character '*zi*' means written characters. Another meaning of the character '*zi*' relevant to my concern here is equivalent to the English word 'handwriting'. Somebody's *zi* means his handwriting (this meaning of '*zi*' will dominate the discussion in chapter 3). The second key term '*shufa*' is again constituted with two characters, *shu* and *fa*. The word *shu* can mean to write, writing, books, style of calligraphy or letter. '*Fa*', as a noun, means rules, law, method; whereas as a verb, it means to model after. *Shufa* can mean both written characters in brush and ink, or the method or principle of writing with a brush. In everyday speech, *shufa* is generally used when the meaning of writing in brush and ink is referred to. For example, if someone asks you whether you *xie* (write) *shufa*, he means whether you practise

writing with brush and ink.[35] More importantly, whenever the term *shufa* is used, the implication of artistic skill, either already acquired or as an objective of attempt, is never far from the surface. In other words, not just any writing in brush and ink can be called *shufa*. It has to be writing that abides by, or with a clear intention to, the set of brush techniques and aesthetic criteria that have been firmly established in the history of Chinese calligraphy.[36] These two terms, *shufa* and *xiezi*, are crucial to this thesis and will appear regularly in the course of analysis. However, the English term 'calligraphy', though unable to convey the full meaning of the term *shufa*, will still be used for the sake of intelligibility.

Despite the distinction between *shufa*, calligraphy as fine art, and *xiezi*, calligraphy as ordinary/practical writing, the line between the two categories is extremely fluid in practice. In fact, many celebrated works of calligraphy in Chinese history were produced as a result of practical writing, but later treated as works of art. Apart from the aesthetic value involved, where the line actually lies is also highly susceptible to the social influence of the writer. Before modern implements became widely available at the beginning of the twentieth century, brush writing was the only form of writing in China.[37] Being educated meant being capable of writing with a brush. Many educated Chinese were able to produce reasonably appealing characters. Given the fluidity of the distinction and the large population of 'potential calligraphers', the actual classification tends to wobble in response to the social influence of the writer. As highlighted by Ledderose, the social eminence of the calligraphers in imperial China was a "precondition to their calligraphy being praised as outstanding" (Ledderose 1986:50). Calligraphic characters by socially influential persons are frequently classified as *mobao* (lit. inked treasure, i.e., treasured calligraphic work).

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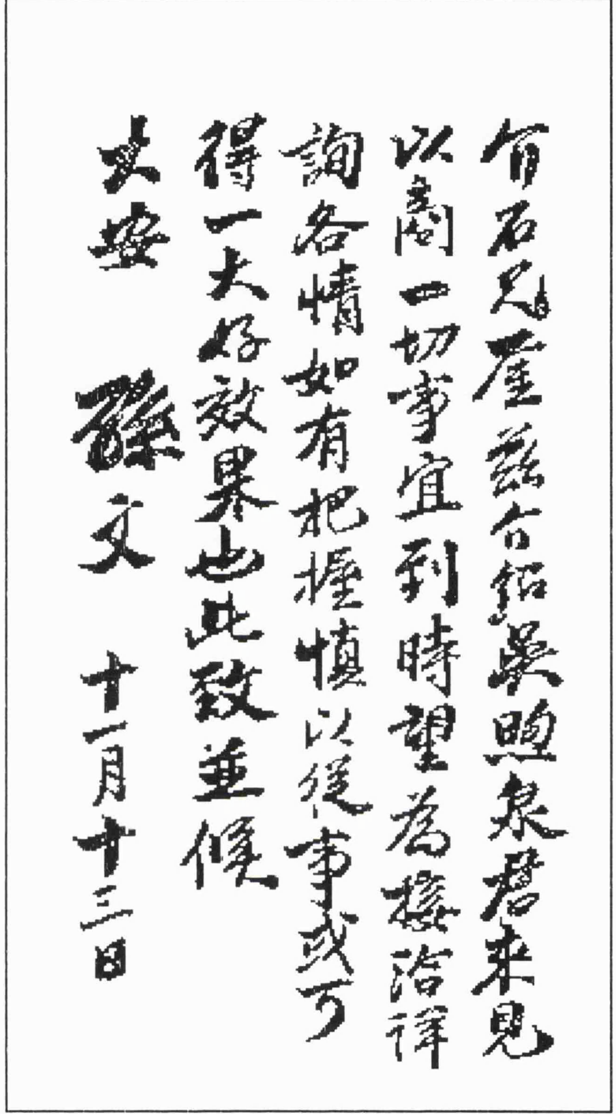
[35] In chapter 3, I will discuss the issue of *yingbi shufa* (fountain-pen calligraphy).

[36] The case of modern *shufa* by some 'avant-garde' *shufajia* (calligraphers) is not confined to this rough definition because it is often produced with the attempt to violate the constraints of orthodox techniques. Further discussion on the relationship between art and aesthetic concerns can be found in footnote 37.

[37] This is exclusive of the use of sharpened bamboo sticks or knives used before the invention of writing brushes. Some argue that these two tools may have coexisted when oracle-bone script (*jiagu wen*) was produced as a means of divination.



介石兄鑒 茲介紹吳煦泉君來見
以閩一切事宜到時望為接洽詳
詢各情如有把握慎以從事或可
得一大好效果也此致並候
大安 孫文 十一月十三日

Fig. 1.5 A handwritten letter by Sun Yat-sen to Chiang Kai-shek. (Source: Liu 1986.)

For example, the calligraphic writing of Sun Yat-sen (Fig. 1.5) and Chiang Kai-shek is always called *mobao* in Taiwan, the same as Mao's writing in the PRC.[38] *Mobao* does not even have to be complete works of calligraphy produced with artistic intention. It can be anything written by people of renown, from casual notes, letters to friends or family, to simple scraps of unintelligible scribbles and written characters. Aesthetic justification in acceptable jargons may ensue after celebrity characters have already been flaunted as fine

[38] It is common to publish collections of handwritten letters or personal notes by political leaders. For example, Sun Yat-sen's letters are published by Wenwu Chubanshe in Beijing (Liu 1986). Mao's handwriting has not just been collected and published (Li *et al.* 1991), there are even dictionaries of his handwriting (since his *zi* is barely legible to most Chinese people).

art or *mobao*.[39] In contrast, characters produced by glamourless hands are more than often relegated to no more than good examples of ordinary writing. They simply do not possess enough social charm to elicit a more favourable assessment.[40] My point is borne out by the remark of my informant who works for a jewellery company. He once told me,

> "*Shufa* is an art of writing (*shuxie de yishu*). It emphasises outward beauty and strives to be pleasing to the eye (*meiguan*). Besides, if you practise *shufa*, you have to model on a copybook or model work (*zitie*).[41] In contrast, *xiezi* doesn't strive for outward attraction. It's purely instrumental. However, if someone's *zi* is good and he is already very famous (*you mingqi*), then even his pure *xiezi* is also called *shufa*... If you take these people for example, then their *zi* are not good enough to be called *shufa*. However, if you are famous (*mingqi da*) and your reputation is high (*shengwang gao*), then your *zi* is most likely to be called *shufa* by other people, even though these people themselves probably wouldn't call their *zi* *shufa*.[42]"

He obviously endorsed the distinction between *shufa* as fine art and *xiezi* as purely instrumental. One's *zi* has to be good enough by some recognised criteria to be called *shufa*. Interestingly, he reserved a grey zone between *shufa* and *xiezi*, and saw it as an area where classification is highly susceptible to *mingqi* (fame). Moreover, he also indicated that the writing of some people may be flaunted as *shufa*, but the writers themselves would simply call it *xiezi*, or at least in public.[43] In fact, when calligraphers talk about practising calligraphy, the actual term they generally use is '*lianzi*', which literally means to practise

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[39] In fact, political leaders' inscriptions are treated as "treasured revolutionary artifacts (*zhengui geming wenwu*)" in the PRC.

[40] The popularity of modern writing tools has undoubtedly lowered the average standard of brush writing among the educated population in general. Nevertheless, the distinction between calligraphy as art and as ordinary writing remains as dubious as ever.

[41] What he meant by "the model work (*zitie*)" refers to a limited collection of calligraphic work that enjoy a solid reputation as masterpieces in the history of *shufa*. However, model brush characters by contemporary calligraphers are often used in the calligraphy curriculum in elementary schools. The former always have definite titles and the name of the calligrapher, whereas the latter often come without titles of their own and are just called *fanben* or *xizitie* (model book). Sometimes their writers are not even mentioned. It is worth pointing out that model characters (not written in ink and brush) are also used in the very early stage of learning how to write characters with other writing implements than a brush. When school children learn to write, they normally have to copy repetitively the printed characters on the top of pages, following the designated stroke orders.

[42] For example, Mao himself never called his writing *shufa*, yet, his brush calligraphy has been routinely revered as art and treasured as *mobao*. Even now, when Mao's charisma has largely dissipated or even turned into infamy in the eyes of some, the lack of rigorous brush techniques in his later flamboyant 'wild cursive (*kuangcao*)' is often leniently regarded by many practising calligrapher/critics as compensated by its sheer vehemence and vigour (*qishi*).

[43] How they think of their own writing in private may be another matter altogether. The public display of verbal modesty is one thing that observers of Chinese society often point out.

writing written characters, the same term used by school pupils.

We can draw a safe conclusion that *mingqi* is definitely one important parameter that turns one's writing into art. The value of one's calligraphy is proportional to one's *mingqi*. In an interview with a calligrapher now based in Kunming, I was told,

> "Now in China, it's definitely *wen yi ming gui* (lit. one's writing becomes valued because the renown of the writer is high). If your social status isn't high enough, very rarely will your *zi* be acknowledged (*bei chengren*). Examples like *Cuan Bao Zi Bei* (a renowned model for calligraphy produced from the rubbing of a stone inscription)[44] are few and far between. The *zi* of the stele is excellent, but the author was nobody. There is another counter-example though. The inscribed board of the Wondering Fairy's Old Hall (*Youxian jiuguan*) in Jindian Temple [a Daoist temple in the outskirts of Kunming] was written by an ordinary teacher of *Sishu* (The Four Books, classics of Confucian teaching). He was a nobody and no one knew about him. He went to the Daoist temple regularly and became friends with the Daoists there, so he wrote the four characters for them as a gesture of friendship. Later, some high officials went to the temple and saw the *zi*. They were very impressed. So he was asked to write more inscriptions for important buildings all over the country. In his late age, he even wrote the signboard for the Bank of Chongqing in Shanghai. That was probably the pinnacle of his social achievement. These are just anomalies, though. Most people ask famous people to write inscriptions for them. Take He Zhiqiang for example [the previous governor of Yunnan Province], he's left a lot of *zi* everywhere in Kunming, such as the signboard of the Kunming Girls' High School... If you are famous (*you mingqi*), not just your *zi* will be revered, even your fart becomes fragrant."

What he suggested is in fact the halo effect of famous people. If you are famous, everything about you has an unusual sheen. As a result, your writing also becomes more beautiful in the eyes of those who succumb to the power of your fame. That is what he meant by *wen yi ming gui*. A big name creates a contagion of value, so the value of his writing shoots up accordingly. But the reverse contagion also exists, i.e., the excellence of writing can also spread to the personality behind the writing (chapter 7). To praise someone's writing as art is to put him on the rank of the culturally accomplished (which is intimately linked to the

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[44] The stele was erected during the East Jing Dynasty (405 AD). It was excavated in 1778 AD in Qujing of Yunnan province. The author of the stele is anonymous. It falls into the category of pre-Tang stele inscriptions that were engraved on stone by anonymous craftsmen. The written version of the characters, on which the engraving was based, were often produced by artless craftsmen themselves. For this reason, they are classified as commoners' writing, lacking the same illustrious association with high-ranking big names.

quality of the person, see chapter 2). It is hardly surprising that the manipulation of the distinction between fine art and mere instrumental writing would become a standard form of flattery. All this strongly underlies my contention that the fuzzy boundary between calligraphy as art and as ordinary writing is endowed with the potential for social manoeuvres. It is a grey zone charged with personal interests. Coupled with the politics of flattery, the labelling of the writing of one's superior as fine art is a common way towards self-advancement. As plainly put by a young man working for a newspaper, "they fawn for the sake of self-interest. For example, if they 'fan the horse fart (*paimapi*, lit. to flatter)' of these famous, and often very powerful people to the point (*pai de qiadao haochu*), they might be able to get some official job to do (*mode yiguan banzhi*)."

The issue of '*xiezi* vs. *shufa*' is reminiscent of the debates on the distinction between mere artefact and works of art. Gell (1996) outlines three strands of thought in relation to the question - Is it art or artefact? The first theory, the aesthetic theory, claims that works of art are aesthetically superior and visually appealing. Firth's summary (1992:18) on different definitions of art by anthropologists also adheres to the aesthetic principle. Van Damme points out that "Despite the attempts of several twentieth-century artists, critics, and philosophers to divorce art from beauty, the view that beauty is a prominent or even the most salient characteristic of art appears very persistent" (van Damme 1997). The second theory, the interpretive theory, sets its criteria on whether a piece of work can be interpreted "in the light of a system of ideas founded within an art-historical tradition".[45] The third, widely known as the institutional theory, concentrates on whether a piece of work is circulated in the artworld as work of art (Danto 1984; Dickie 1997; Becker 1982). Since the issue of 'calligraphy vs. mere writing' is essentially about what makes some writing art, it seems plausible to carry out the discussion within the framework of the three existing theories summarised and highlighted by Gell.

What would be the applicability of each of these three theories in the case of Chinese calligraphy? According to my informant quoted earlier, *shufa* as an art of writing stresses outward beauty and strives to be pleasing to the eye. The element of visual attraction of calligraphy can definitely be found in popular beliefs. Secondly, art historical traditions of

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[45] The anthropological relevance of this theory can be found in some anthropological definitions of art that regard the culturally relevant meanings as a prerequisite (van Damme 1997).

Chinese calligraphy are fully established. To judge whether or not a piece of calligraphic work is art in the light of a system of ideas found in that tradition, such as ideas linked to brush manoeuvring, composition and the continuation of *qi*, is exactly what has been done in the art historical tradition of Chinese calligraphy. In other words, both the aesthetic theory and the interpretive theory have their respective strongholds. What is really controversial is the institutional theory, one induced by the attempt to incorporate the success of works such as Duchamp's and Andy Warhol's, which showed "no trace of the artist at all, either in skill or intention" (Becker 1982:140). The institutional theory would display its strength when one takes into account some modern calligraphic works, such as Gu Gan and Xu Bing, just to name a few. Their works challenge the tradition and authority of traditional calligraphy by employing unorthodox media and graphic forms.[46] Though defying established

[46] Contemporary *shufa* practitioners in China can be divided into two camps. One camp follows the orthodox techniques and refuses to treat *shufa* as anything but writing; whereas the other one, generally referred to as *xiandai pai* (the modern school), seeks to break free from the shackles of tradition by introducing unorthodox treatment of ink and brush techniques into the creative process. One of the dominant trends among the unorthodox modern school *shufa* is to try to emancipate the picture-element of written characters (see chapter 6) and treat written characters as pure abstract drawing. The other dominant trend, *moxiang pai* (the 'ink phenomenon' school), concentrates on the experiments of different ink effects that were traditionally regarded as failure. *Xiandai pai* calligraphy is often received by the calligraphic community in China with scorn. They are mainly criticised for two reasons: firstly, they have diverged from Chinese 'writing', which is regarded as the absolute requirement for anything that is to be called *shufa* at all. This group of criticism argues that *shufa* cannot, and should not be drawn (*hua*). Secondly, the returning-to-the-picture-root attempt is dismissed as taking up a path that has been tried and failed (Feng 1989; Wu 1990; Chen 1997). All in all, the modern calligraphy movement has received a great deal of opposition and disapproval.

It is worth mentioning that one of the most popular targets for contemporary Chinese artists to challenge the received wisdom of traditional Chinese culture is the written character. In 1998 a collection of experimental works by Gu Gan, Xu Bing and Qi Gong were exhibited in the British Museum under the title 'Modern Chinese Art'. Though classified as work of calligraphy, Xu Bing's work '*Tianshu*' (A Book from the Sky) involves absolutely no use of brush and ink. It is a thread-bound book printed on sutra paper by an ancient 'moveable wooden block' technology. Xu laboriously carved all the printing wood blocks (one for each character) and finally hand-printed the book himself. The book comprises four thousand characters which appear, in terms of graphic form and structure, to be Chinese, but are entirely illegible in terms of their linguistic signification. "Each character is the artist's own invention. Like all Chinese characters, Xu's characters incorporate etymologically meaningful elements, thereby creating an irresistible urge on the part of the viewer to make sense of these nonsense characters" (Hay 1992:38). None of these characters can be found in any dictionary, therefore the whole book is entirely unreadable. In this way, Xu challenges the authority of Chinese writing, which is often regarded fundamental to Chinese culture and sometimes treated as synonymous with Chinese tradition itself.

Gu Gan is one of the pioneers in the modern calligraphy movement in the 1980s'. His work reflects his artistic attempt to incorporate changing views of modern times and Western ideas into Chinese calligraphy. As a result, the influence of Western artists such as Klee and Miró can be detected in the graphic forms of his calligraphy. He often manipulates the paper surface by crumpling and spraying to create special texture for his writing. His inking technique is also unorthodox. His characteristic use of overnight-ink, breaking ink and water dropping combine to give his calligraphy various tones and inking effects which would have been considered poor technical command by traditional standards.

artistic rules of calligraphy, as in the case of modern art in the West, the fact that they are accepted as art stretches the definition of calligraphy as art.

A piece of brush writing is labelled art because it is either beautiful, or it can be interpreted in the light of ideas founded in the art historical tradition of Chinese calligraphy, or it has been circulated as art within the artworld. But these theories do not exhaust all the possible explanations for how and why some instrumental products of *xiezi* are hailed as art, i.e., *shufa*. I propose that the dimension of social manipulation should also be treated as an alternative explanation in the case of Chinese calligraphy.[47] As a result, the greater one's fame and social influence, the more likely one's *zi* will be revered as art.[48]

In the case of Chinese calligraphy, the power to decide whether some writing is art is not held strictly within the artworld as claimed by the institutional theory (Danto 1984; Dickie 1997). The very pervasiveness of calligraphy in Chinese lives makes it impossible to be comfortably bound to a highly exclusive art world. It is very likely that one should be confronted by a situation in which a decision, or at least a public remark, on whether someone's brush handwriting can be called art has to be made. Is it art or is it not? It is a decision many Chinese people have to make at some time in life. It is not left to art historians and art dealers/collectors alone. Social charisma and influence alone is enough to elevate one's writing to the status of high art.

Outside the British Museum, there were also calligraphers who highlighted the graphic potential of written characters by integrating the meaning and the graphic form of character within one bounded surface (Fig. 1.6a &b). The works of these artists do not fall readily into the well established tradition of Chinese calligraphy and preictably invited criticism. In fact, they are self-conscious violations of the set rules of both calligraphy and written Chinese characters. Nonetheless, they have been circulated as works of art within the artworld in the PRC and abroad.

[47] I do not argue that it is exclusive to Chinese calligraphy though. One can certainly find parallel examples in Western art history. Picasso's later works, which he regarded as a complete failure, attract no less admiration from average art lovers.

[48] This phenomena can also be understood as a ramification of the general amateurization within the artworld of traditional China. Cahill (1994:5-11) points out that an insistence, within any respectable practice, on a distinction between amateurism and professionalism, and a resolute preference for the former. The logic underlying this "amateur ideal" is that amateur practitioners were seen to be free from the material gains of their creativity, therefore abiding to the right principles. Sivin found parallel attitudes in medical practice: "To the minds of the educated elite, not only did the [technically trained] imperial physicians hold no special position, but their names were anonymous. The only doctors whose names were likely to be on everyone's tongue were gifted and brilliant amateurs from the top of the scholar-official class. What brought them fames as physicians was their social status, not vice versa" (N. Sivin, quoted in Cahill 1994:5-6).

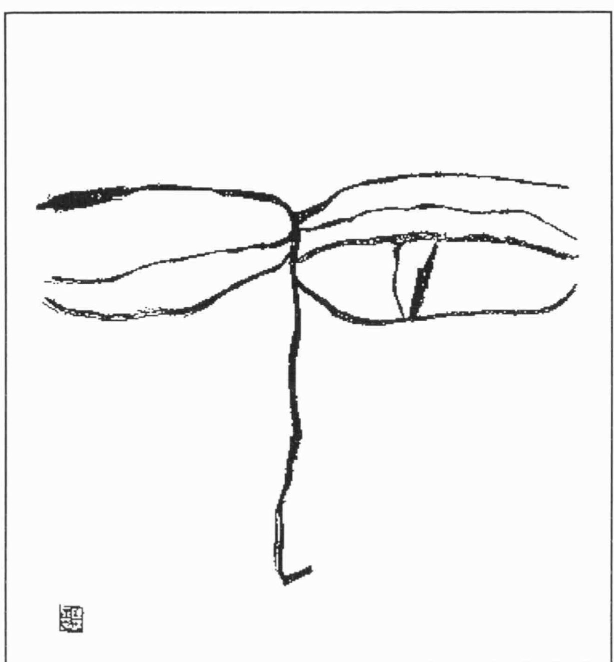

Fig. 1.6a Chen Zhidong. *Kan* means to look at or to see. The artists exaggerates the shape of eyes to highlight the connection between form and meaning (Source: Yi 1988).

Fig. 1.6b Ge Hongzhen. *Feifei* means fly, fly. The simplified character *fei*, to fly, is written in a way to make it resemble a flying bird (From Yi 1998: 64).

1.4.2 Art or Non-art: A Question to the Anthropologist

Is it art or is it not? It is not a question reserved for the native Chinese in their everyday life. It is no less a pressing issue for an anthropologist who makes Chinese calligraphy his/her subject of study. What fascinates me most about the issue is the tendency of 'assessment reversal'. When the subject of study is a tribal or simple society, there is a tendency among anthropologists to treat and label aspects of the native material culture/practice as 'art', even when 'art' is an alien category to the natives themselves (Firth 1992; Shelton 1992; Moeran 1997; cf. van Damme 1997), such as the ceremonial bowls, arrows and woven material of the Huichol (Shelton 1992), the Abelam flat painting (Forge 1973), the body decoration of the New Guinea Highland (O'Hanlon 1989), the Melagan sculptures in Northern New Ireland (Küchler 1985; 1988; 1992), the Yangoru Boiken spirit house (Roscoe 1995), just to mention a few. As Raymond Firth rightly pointed out, "The

concept of art as such is alien to the practice and presumably the thought of many of the peoples studied by anthropologists, who try to present the people's own iconic classification as a whole" (Firth 1992:26).[49] Most of these indigenous 'art forms', like a Huichol ceremonial object, "has no existence independent of the religious or ritual contexts for which traditional objects were and are made, and which both provide the rules for their manufacture and use and supply the criteria for their evaluation" (Shelton 1992:235). When faced with a subject such as Chinese calligraphy, which has been firmly received as an art form by the Chinese for centuries,[50] anthropologists, in contrast, question whether it should be treated as an art form at all.[51] Interestingly, "about the one thing that has become clear from the anthropological approach to art is that nobody is quite sure what art, especially 'primitive art', is" (Moeran 1997:5). There is a tension between these two conventions of assessment. This tension is, I propose, a result of the tug of war between two opposing forces. One is the tendency within social anthropology, as Gell pointed out, not to take things literally. This can be seen in examples such as the "methodological atheism" realised in the anthropological study of religion (Gell 1992:41). The other force is the deeply ingrained sentiment that most anthropologists have for aesthetic value. Anthropologists who are mesmerised by the beauty of ritual or exchange objects they see in the field feel an irresistible urge to call these fascinating things art. Whereas once what they are confronted with is widely known as art, they involuntarily take up the attitude of "methodological philistinism", as Gell calls it (1992) - an attitude of "resolute indifference towards the aesthetic value of works of art." This attitude parallels the methodological atheism towards the study of religion. However, I believe that in the coexistence of these ambivalent attitudes lies the full strength of the anthropology of art. The sensitivity towards aesthetic appeal prompts one to see objects in their individuality; whereas the professional methodological

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[49] Moeran (1997:7) pointed out the similarity between the problem faced by philosophers of art and anthropologists: "Why are some objects labelled as art and others not?"However, a more pressing question should be about, as van Damme justly notes, what is actually meant by 'art' in Western conception before it is asserted that non-Western cultures do not have the same words for 'art' (van Damme 1997).

[50] Writing began to be seen as aesthetically valued from the third to the fourth century in China. The value of particular individual's writing came to be recognised. As a result, methods of copying were exploited so that calligraphy by noted masters could be duplicated. From the Tang dynasty onwards, collections of calligraphy were made, which also encouraged the development of calligraphic writing into art (Rawson 1992:97).

[51] Thomas (1995:26) points out another side of the common unease anthropologists tend to feel towards the study of 'high art' as a subject, "Current work in the anthropology of material culture and cultural studies is certainly oriented away from 'high art' and towards popular media and apparently mundane artifacts such as domestic appliances, interior decoration and so on." He urges anthropologists to recognise the importance of 'high art' at a national level .

philistinism situates these aesthetic properties in their social context.

Unquestionably, all artistic practices can be seen from two contrasting angles. One focuses on the stage before the work or practice takes up the halo of art, the other one after it. This stance sets the stage for the seemingly eclectic position I plan to take in the dissertation: Chinese calligraphy is both art and non-art. To treat Chinese calligraphy as non-art is to subscribe to the doctrine of the sociology of art, that is to see artwork as a product of extra-aesthetic processes, such as social institutions and ideologies (Hauser 1982; Wolff 1981; 1993; Zolberg 1989). This position is the opposite to the stance taken by aestheticians, who argue that qualities of the greatness of artwork are immanent in the work. There have been some efforts by anthropologists to address the issue of art objects as a product of extra-aesthetic processes. For example, Moeran's work (1997) is an attempt to construct a picture of the "art world"[52] of the Japanese pottery by looking at the social and ideological processes surrounding its production, marketing, appreciation, interpretation and discussion. Another anthropologist who has consciously addressed the issues raised by the sociology of art is Alfred Gell. Refusing to be entrapped in the awe-inspiring aura of art, sociologists of art endeavour to demystify art by putting it into social context.[53] While doing so, they tend to reduce artwork to the product of mere social activities or symbolic meanings, running the risk of eclipsing the individual qualities of the work (Gell 1992). For example, "the sociologism of Bourdieu (1968) never actually looks at the art object itself as a concrete product of human ingenuity, but only at its power to mark social distinctions" (Gell 1992:42-3). As a result, various social processes take charge and individual artwork *per se* recedes to insignificance. To rescue artwork from such reductionism, Gell proposed that art could be treated as a system of technology (1992), by which he meant the techniques involved in the production of artwork. In so doing, he argued that one can "retain the capacity of the aesthetic approach to illuminate the specific objective characteristics of the art objects as an object, rather as a vehicle for extraneous social and

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[52] A concept originally "proposed by philosopher Arthur Danto, developed into full-blown philosophical theory by (among others) George Dickie, and given sociological credibility by Howard Becker" (Moeran 1997:6). For a definition and elaboration on the notion of art world, see Becker 1982.

[53] Hence the study of art as an institution (Albrecht *et al.* 1970). For example, Wolff (1981) argues that art is a social product, rather than the creation of solitary genius/artist. And, the theory of art as concerned with disinterested contemplation of the form of the object for its own sake, is a product of eighteenth-century aestheticism which is loaded with social and economic undertones (Abrams 1985, in Firth 1992:23).

symbolic messages, without succumbing to the fascination which all well-made art objects exert on the mind attuned to their aesthetic properties" (ibid.:43).

One may suspect that there is a high risk, in Gell's approach, of falling back on the intrinsic and superior value of artwork *per se*, which is precisely what the sociology of art steered away from. However, the relapse can be avoided by further stretching the focus of analysis to extra-aesthetic dimensions. Instead of dismissing the artistic details embraced by participants of the artworlds in order to resist the seduction of the aesthetic appeal, Gell's approach derives its strength from taking into consideration the aesthetic characteristics and turning them into the key to understanding related social processes. It is a roundabout approach - from within artwork to the social dimensions, then back to the artwork once again. By doing so, it enables us to scrutinise how the process of shrouding artwork in an aura is integrated into the production of social relations and the legitimation of social power. Various writers have sought to banish the distinction between artistic work and other types of practical work (Wolff 1981).[54] If the mystery surrounding artwork is the very condition in which artistic work is distinguished from other types of work, then it justifies an investigation into the coming about of such mystery, rather than simply dismissing it. The strength of the anthropology of art lies precisely in its capacity to give art objects a social context by describing the ritual, exchange and other social processes in which the objects are embedded, as well as examining the aesthetic details of the objects *per se*. And this is a delightful result of the ambivalence anthropologists have for objects of beauty, as mentioned earlier. As a result, the stance I take in this thesis is an analysis of Chinese calligraphy as a social process, as well as an artistic process. For this reason, detailed analysis on the technical accumulation and appreciation of Chinese calligraphy (chapters 4 and 5) will form a significant part of the thesis in order to understand how and why the training process of calligraphy as a 'technique of the body' constitutes an important element in Chinese embodiment. This brings us to the relationship between calligraphy and personhood.

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[54] Wolff (1981) criticizes the convention to think of artistic work as essentially different from other kinds of practical work, which is thought to be the necessary result of human needs. Instead, she embraces Vazquez's idea that both artistic and practical work (labour) are manifestations of the human creative nature. "Artistic activities as a uniquely different kind of work, with a unique, indeed transcendent, product is a mistaken notion based on certain historical developments, and wrongly generalised and taken to be essential to the nature of art" (Wolff 1981:17).

1.5 Anthropological Literature on Personhood and Embodiment

Scholarly writing on Chinese personhood has been mainly concerned with the issue of relation-vs. individual-centredness (cf. Liang 1949; Tu 1972, 1985; Fei 1983; Hsu 1985; Yang 1994; Morris 1994; Sangren 1996). This body of writing has a strong tradition of seeing the Chinese person as relation-based, rather than individual-based. For example, Tu argues that the Neo-Confucian goal of self-cultivation is deeply imbricated in social interactions with others, even though this self does not merge or disappear into social relations (Sangren 1996). Yang also argues that "The autonomy and rights of persons and the sense of personal identity are based on differences in moral and social status and on the moral claims and judgements of others. Chinese personhood and personal identity are not given in the abstract as something intrinsic to and fixed in human nature, but are constantly being created, altered, and dismantled in particular social relationships" (Yang 1994:192). As a consequence, "The self is a configuration of self-other relations in a variety of settings" (Chu 1985:261). However, Elvin (1986) argues that Chinese ideas about the self, from the late archaic time to the present day, were extraordinarily varied. Similarly, Oxfeld (1992) points out that different orientations (individual-centred, or relation-centred) can be found depending on the realm of action or period of history and context that one is investigating, or both. By now, it has become commonsense that the dichotomy should be treated with care and substantiated with social contexts. What has not received due attention in this ever-growing body of literature is the contents and emblems of Chinese personhood, i.e., what is taken to be indicative of the person. Watson (1986), in her study on naming and gender relationship, implies that personal names are one of these emblems. In this dissertation, I will argue that (hand-)writing is another important one. This will be discussed as an important aspect of the process of becoming a person through learning (Thompson 1990).

In China, writing is not just epiphenomenal, it is central to the making of a person. This contrasts with most societies studied by anthropologists, for example: the Tamil (Daniel 1984); the Hagan of Papua New Guinea (Strathern & Strathern 1971; Strathern 1979); the Vezo of Madagascar (Astuti 1995); the Temiar of the Malaysian Rainforest (Roseman 1991); the Kel Ewey Tuareg of Niger (Rasmussen 1995); and the Cashinahua of western Amazonia. The approach I take to explore the relationship between writing and the Chinese

personhood is influenced by the recent interest in 'the body' in social sciences and cultural studies. Since Marcel Mauss (1979 [1936]) highlighted the notion of "body techniques", anthropology of body has moved a long way. It has undergone a shift of focus from the body as the source of symbolism (cf. Hertz 1973; Douglas 1973; 1984) or as a template of social classification (Lock 1993:136) to the body as" the locus of social practice" (Csordas 1993:135; see also Lock 1993; cf. Bourdieu 1977; 1984; Comaroff 1985).[55] Meanwhile, the body has also moved away from a repository and memory pack of social values, an automaton which receives values and disciplines (Shilling 1993:127; cf. Foucault 1984b), to a site where one's subjectivity is generated through active participation in social practice. The 'socially informed body' (Bourdieu 1977) is seen, not simply as the site where discipline or power leave their imprint, but more importantly, as "possessing rudimentary forms of subjectivity that becomes... both a social identity and a cultural subject (Turner 1995:145). The result of all this development is the emergence of *embodiment* as a major paradigm or methodological orientation in anthropology (Csordas 1990; 1993; Scheper-Hughes 1994; Strathern 1996; cf. Jackson 1983). Body becomes the methodological starting point rather than merely an object of study. The notion of *embodiment*, as Lambek and Strathern point out, is "a processual term, whose locus lies in the reception of the cultural into the body but equally the work of the body in building cultural forms... It implies agency in terms of the willed bodily actions of persons rather than their passive performance of roles" (Lambek & Strathern 1998:13).

It is important to note that the place of body in the shaping of a person has been central to Confucian ideas for over two thousand years (Bray 1997:41; see also Tu 1983). Bodily action was seen to shape identity. It is therefore, in every sense, an indigenous Chinese outlook to see the body as the locus for the production of the personhood. The paradigm of embodiment is adopted in this dissertation to investigate how the training of calligraphy is imbricated in the formation of a Chinese person. In chapters 2 to 5, I will show this in relation to the civilising process (*wen*), process of becoming a person, and the social embodiment implied by calligraphic techniques and training. We will see that handwriting is, consciously or unconsciously, treated - both in popular and elite conceptualisations - as

[55] The attention to bodily practices in everyday life was formulated to overcome the dualism between mental structures and the material worlds. Anthropologists used Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory "as a starting point to counter what they see as the mistaken enterprise of interpreting embodied experience in terms of cognitive and linguistic models of interpretation" (Lock 1993:137).

revelatory of the inner self of the writer. In other words, writing, in China, should be seen as a key component of cultural embodiment, i.e., a physical process which moulds the body-person of the Chinese in particular ways.

1.6 Literacy and Society

Unlike Chinese culture, the issue of writing in most societies is most apparently related to literacy rather than art or personhood. One main concern of anthropological studies of literacy concentrates on the issue of literacy and its relationship with the society in general. Street (1993; see also Collins 1995) distinguishes two approaches to the study of literacy: the autonomous model and the ideological model. In the autonomous model - represented by Goody, Ong and Olson - literacy is seen as either an individual cognitive tool or a neutral function of institutions. By contrast, in the ideological model - advocated by Street in his collection of "new literacy studies" - literacy is seen as "inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society" (Street 1993:7). He proposes that the move from the autonomous model towards the ideological one is to replace the orality/literacy divide with a continuum. The assumption of the orality/literacy "great divide" is what Parry (1989:200) calls "the technology of the intellect" - literacy plays a crucial role in the potential to transform social and mental life, a notion suggested by Goody's work *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. The transformations propelled by widespread literacy, argues Goody, are: the movement from magic to science and from myth to history facilitated by the scepticism that comes with writing (1977:150); the shift towards critical evaluative knowledge that potentially challenges political authority, because writing fixes fleeting and fluid speech, therefore making contradiction in discourse apparent (i.e., from autocracy to democracy); and the promotion of individualism and stimulation of creativity by recording individual innovation. Since Goody is particularly interested in the transformation of cognitive processes (particularly syllogistic reasoning) brought about by literacy (Halverson 1992), Parry accused Goody of slipping into an equation between literate societies and "cognitive modernism", and between pre-literate societies and "cognitive traditionalism" (Parry 1989).

Goody's view is challenged by many. It is generally argued that literacy is not a *sufficient*, but a *necessary* condition for the transformations he has put forth (Schousboe & Larsen 1989). For instance, Gough (1968) cites examples from traditional China and India to argue that widespread literacy does not necessitate a clear distinction between myth and history, nor does it necessarily produce democracy. Parry (1989) argues that literacy, in the North Indian Brahmanical tradition, far from promoting scepticism, provides a certain immunity against it. Similarly, Halverson argues that "manifest contradictions in the text of the Bible do not lead to scepticism, at least when faith is reasonably strong, but to attempts to harmonize such passages by interpretation" (Halverson 1992:315). Bloch also argues that the use of literacy, for the Marina in Madagascar, shares all the characteristics Goody attributes to the oral and "literacy has not transformed the nature of Merina knowledge - it confirmed it" (Bloch 1989:26).

Interestingly, as Bloch (1989) points out, all articles in Goody's edited book on the implication of literacy (Goody 1968), with the exception of the one written by Goody and Watt, provided counter-evidence to his central argument - the great divide brought about by literacy. To take the challenge to Goody's literacy thesis one step further, Halverson (1992) contends that literacy is neither a *sufficient*, nor a *necessary* condition for syllogistic reasoning. This leads to what he calls "the implosion of the literacy thesis". The implication of this is that the only thing left to the literacy thesis is the commonsensical preservative potential of writing. However, as Bloch (1989:15) justly points out, the fertility of Goody's literacy thesis lies in the debate it provoked. And as a battleground, it helps to facilitate the critical examination of a theory which is widely and implicitly accepted by social thinkers. To contribute to the critical examination of an implicit belief within social sciences, Bloch concludes that Goody's argument reproduces an ethnocentric view on the relationship between communication and knowledge (1989). To offer a different, but equally valid, folk view on this relationship, Bloch resorted to Japanese ideograms. This literature leads to the discussion in one of the key chapters in this thesis, in which I make a critique of Bloch's argument and elaborate on a Chinese understanding of writing, from both theoretical and popular perspectives (chapter 6).

To sum up briefly, this dissertation will show that calligraphy/writing is a highly empowered cultural form from which deep knowledge is extracted, with which power speaks, and by which the Chinese personhood is both indicated and formulated.

2. Becoming a Person Through *Wen*

In this chapter, by problematising the translation of the Chinese term '*wenhua*' into the English term 'culture', I attempt to show that the notion of *wenhua* is central to the idea of becoming a Chinese person. I will discuss it in relation to city-dwellers and migrant workers in Kunming to highlight what comprises Chinese personhood in concrete terms and popular conceptualisations.

2.1 *Mingong*: Anything that City People Are Not

To briefly set the context for the following discussion, it is worth mentioning that "negative attitudes and values toward peasants have been deeply embedded in Chinese thinking for more than 2,000 years, legitimized by Confucius, who apparently felt that it was morally preferable for officials to regard the concerns of peasants as beneath their notice" (Potter & Potter 1990:299-300). To make things worse, as a response to a massive exodus of the rural population into urban areas, a formal rural/urban population division was made official in the PRC in the late 1950s, and has served as the basis for the creation of two caste-like and hereditary civil status groups (ibid.:296-7). The implication of the distinction, substantiated by the household registration system (*hukou*) and resulting in differentiated access to various goods and life chances as well as freedom in migration, has received a lot of scholarly attention (see, for example, Potter & Potter 1990:296-312; Walden 1989:405-24; Cheng & Selden 1994). This inequality has placed peasants in an inferior position to city dwellers, as well as prioritized the city over the countryside.[1] Since the ban on migration was lifted in 1980s (Cheng & Selden 1994), waves of migration from the countryside to cities have been pulsing throughout China. Social problems linked to the influx of rural people into cities have been officially identified as one of the major sources of social instability in China

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[1] As a result of this inequality, urban friends and relatives are considered valuable social capital by villagers. This affects their gift relationships (Yan 1996:110, 159). "When villagers have gift-giving relationships with urban relatives, they are also in a disadvantageous position... Villagers are considered inferior to their urban relatives... they often give more than they receive" (Yan 1996:159).

in the post-Mao reform era (Solinger 1995; Sun 1995; Yu & Xiao 1995; Wehrfritz 1994; Liu 1995). Against this general background, my investigation into the Chinese notion of *wenhua* concerns the attitudes of city dwellers in Kunming towards this influx of rural people.

Two categories of people are central to this section: *mingong* and *Kunming ren*. *Mingong* refers to peasants working in the city.[2] More specifically, *mingong* refers to peasants who migrate to the city, on a long or short-term basis, and who assume labour jobs in the city. They are members of a new urban grouping and are generally referred to as the "floating population" or "migrant workers" by Western observers (see Solinger 1995), or as *mangliu* (blind current) by the Chinese media. They venture into cities in hope for a better life, both socially and financially. *Mingong* are an indispensable part of urban life in Kunming, as well as in most modern Chinese cities. But what concerns me most about them is the tension and threat they pose to the local dwellers in Kunming, and the underlying rationale for their hostility towards *mingong*.

The second category is '*Kunming ren*', the term that people in Kunming use to refer to themselves. Though describing people whose roots are in Kunming in a literal sense, the majority of people I know and who call themselves *Kunming ren* are very clear that they are not from Kunming originally. Either their parents migrated to Kunming from other provinces in China, or they were born and brought up in places outside Kunming. What they have in common, however, is that they have been dwelling in Kunming for a long time. The labelling is therefore contextual in nature. That is to say, only when the past is relevant in conversation will they call themselves '*Hainan ren*' (people from Hainan province), or '*Dali ren*' (people from Dali, a town in Yunnan province). However, when they talk about the contrast between migrant peasants in Kunming and themselves, they unfailingly call themselves '*Kunming ren*'. The general attitude of *Kunming ren* toward *mingong* in Kunming was so strong that it grabbed my attention as soon as I arrived in Kunming.

Kunming ren have a deep distrust for *mingong* - the undisciplined force flowing into the city, enticed by its relative wealth. This scattered mass of country folk, unused to orderly

[2] The term '*mingong*' and '*nongmin*' (peasants from the countryside), tend to be used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people by local people in Kunming.

urban life, has become the target of grudge and complaint. On the evening I arrived in Kunming, I was told by the mother of one of my host families:

> "These peasants never received much education. As soon as they realise the prosperity of the city, they rush out of their villages, trying to make more money out of our prosperity. They come here unequipped with any knowledge or special skill. That is why they are willing to do anything that *Kunming ren* can not condescend themselves to do. It is good in a way because at least there will be people to do the base jobs. But there are also many drawbacks of allowing them to stay in Kunming. Since their *wenhua shuiping* (*wenhua* standard) is so low that they do not know a thing. They never follow the traffic rules, taking people on the bike, running through red lights. That's not all, trickery and forgery is shockingly widespread nowadays. Thanks to the *mangliu* (blind current). What do they care? They run away once they have your money safely in their pockets. These people have no *hukou* (registered permanent residence) in Kunming, so it is virtually impossible to track and discipline them. Even we *Kunming ren* are afraid of them. They are very dangerous."

Interestingly, the father of this informant came to Kunming from Shiping - a small town in Yunnan - decades ago and she sometimes called herself *Shiping ren* (person from Shiping), especially when she reminisced about the good aspects of Shiping. Being new to the city as well as the country, I was strongly advised to keep away from these "dangerous elements (*weixian fenzi*)" with low *wenhua shuiping*. When *Kunming ren* complain about the chaos created by *mingong*, they usually attribute their incompatibility with the urban life to the fact that they have low *wenhua shuiping*. In reality, original Kunming people also do the things she criticised about. But they tend to always make *mingong* scapegoats for the increasing chaos they experience with apprehension in the city.

2.1.1 Strong as Bull; Greedy as Pig

The day after I was handed the key to the flat I rented through one of my host families, one of my key informants, Lan (a government magazine editor fresh from university, who later became a good friend) offered to find some *mingong* so that I did not have to spend too much money to move.[3] She told me,

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[3] Moving companies with vans were rather common when I was there, but they normally charged two to three times as much as *mingong*, I was told. Somehow Lan's family got the impression that I was a spendthrift, even though it was not congruent with their general image of Taiwanese. Genuinely regarding me as a valued friend, Lan often took initiative to plan for me ways to cut down unnecessary spending.

> "Those Sichuan [the province on the northern border of Yunnan, generally considered the poorest in China, as a result the biggest source of *mingong* in Kunming] *mingong* are as strong as bulls. They can carry a huge fully loaded bookcase and climb up to the sixth floor without stopping. They just lift the bookcase as if it was a wicker basket. Kunming men cannot do that. They'd pant and turn pale with fatigue after climbing up to the sixth floor empty-handed. I am not joking. Those Sichuan *mingong* can do anything. You give them *jishi kuai*[4] (a few tens of *kuai*, unit of Chinese currency) and they'll do anything for you."

On the day of the move, two young men arrived with her at the door with a pedicab [a pedal-powered taxi]. They swiftly loaded the pedicab with my books and a few pieces of furniture, then cycled to the entrance to the block where my flat was situated. On the sixth floor, the large windows of the flat glimmered in Kunming's eternal sunshine. Under Lan's instruction, I waited in the flat and she stood near the pedicab while the two *mingong* climbed up and down the narrow staircase with, it seemed to me, crushing loads. The two allegedly 'strong-as-bull' men, in Lan's words, groaned and complained about the weight throughout the whole process. Jokingly, they acted as if already exhausted. By the time Lan followed them into the flat, I was already feeling guilty, having seen one of the *mingong* struggling with my notoriously heavy case packed with books. When the laborious job was all finished, the two playful young men softly demanded more money than Lan agreed to offer in advance. Because of my guilt, I did not hesitate to respond generously to their demand. They literally leapt with joy and ran downstairs, their energy restored. For me it appeared only reasonable and above all, I was extremely grateful. However Lan was not at all happy about this. She complained, "How could they ask for more money after we'd already agreed on the price? These Sichuan *mingong* are always greedy, like pigs. Luckily we watched over your things in the process. Otherwise who knows what would have slid into their pockets?"

2.1.2 They Cheat; They Breed

Crimes are habitually attributed to *mingongs*. The mother of one of my host families, an artist with national fame and credentials, was particularly paranoid about these peasants in the city. She was horrified after learning that I often initiated conversations with strangers

[4] The exchange rate, when I was there, was around 12.5 *kuai* to one pound. A monthly income of around 750 RMB was a long way above average in Kunming then.

in the street for the sake of my research,

> "Don't just talk to any stranger in the street! You are our guest, so we have the responsibility to protect you. You see, those people selling things in the street, especially around the Beijing Road and Dongfeng Road, are often *mangliu* (blind current). Don't buy things from them. Ninety percent of the things they sell are fake anyway. Or they simply grab your money and run. There is nothing you can do if that happens. They cheat and trick you. Sometimes you don't even realise that you've been tricked."

To her, these *mingongs* do not just cheat. They are also ignorant and indifferent to state policies. On one of the many evenings after dinner with the family, the CCTV (Central Chinese Television) news announced that the population of China has officially reached 1.2 thousand million. The baby girl who was officially registered as the 1.2 thousand millionth person in China received a gold plate for her opportune time of birth. The news, as was often the case in their after-dinner family chats, stirred up a discussion about the population problem in China. The mother told me,

> "Aiya (exclamation)! China already has so many people, but those peasants still keep making babies with all their might (*pinming sheng xiaohai*). This only happens in the countryside. It is very different in the city. The one-child policy is carried out rigorously in the city. One wouldn't have a second child unless your first child is disabled or with some other health problem. If just one couple has more than one child against the law, then the bonus of their whole *danwei* (work unit) is sabotaged. The person who breached the rule is likely to be sacked too. City people are more sensible because they know that too many kids would lower their standard of living. But peasants are totally different, like that shoe-fixer whose stall is by our compound gate. He and his wife are from Sichuan countryside. Before they came to Kunming, he was too poor to have kids. After they arrived in Kunming, they could earn twenty or thirty *kuai* a day, so the couple started to making babies (*sheng xiaohai*). Before you even realise it, they already have three kids. How horrible! These peasants are so ignorant (*mei zhishi*)."

Apparently, she was not aware of the different population control policies enforced in urban and rural areas.[5] However, excess births among the floating population is a well-recognised

[5] One-child policy in China has been loosened since first outlined in 1979. In some rural areas, more than one child is permitted without a fine (*fakuan*) or other forms of punishment, such as increasing a household's workload by expanding the amount of agricultural land they must tend. In urban areas, a second child is permitted when the first one is seriously handicapped, or when both spouses are only children. But there is no universal rule throughout the whole China linked to population policy. For example, birth control policies in minority areas are set locally and generally less strict than in Han areas. The form of punishment or compensation adopted also varies from place to place, depending on the local government. For a thorough discussion on the one-child policy and its impact on family structure in China,

fact. Surveys indicate that there are between 10 to 20 million "illegitimate" children (black children) populating Chinese cities (Solinger 1995:120).

2.1.3 Peasant Hats or Trendy Hats?

Hostile attitudes towards peasants and *mingong* are not just targeted at the people themselves. Objects associated with peasantry are also indiscriminately scorned. They are regarded as out-dated and of bad taste. This attitude is faithfully reflected on hats. Being a city of high altitude, every girl/woman in Kunming has at least one wide-brimmed sun hat to protect her skin from tanning. Like women in other parts of China, they consider fair-skin more desirable. As a well-known saying goes, 'One element of fair skin is sufficient to hide three elements of ugliness (*yibai zhe sanchou*).' Naturally, hat shops abound in Kunming. During traffic jams, sun hats fill the street like a colourful froth floating on a sea of cyclists, rolling and waving along according to the rhythm of the traffic flow. Often girls have more than one hat to match different outfits. The most popular hats in 1995 had decorative bands made of floral patterned fabric, which normally formed a large bow on the back with two long end bands sloping down from the brim. These were the sun-hats that girls/women with good taste should wear. The colour of straw, the pattern of bands, as well as the slight variations in the shapes of the crown and the brim, constitute the difference in style.

I did not realise this unelaborated dress code until I had to hunt for a 'perfect peasant straw hat' as a souvenir. These hats do not have floral fabric bands. They are made of straw so fresh that its grain and texture is still perceptible, unlike the fashionable ones made from either synthetic material or straw that is already processed into an anonymously smooth surface. These peasant hats were shaped like a bell without contouring between crown and brim. Whenever I spotted a peasant hat sitting on someone's head, I asked the person where I could buy one in Kunming. The replies were always something like 'I don't know. I got this one from some village outside Kunming. Why do you want them anyway? They are old and no longer fashionable. You should go to those hat shops and buy yourself a pretty hat instead.' Indeed, people who still wore them in the city were often peddlers, migrant workers or roadside market stall holders. Neither did my Chinese friends understand my fascination with these hats. In fact, it became a joke to be passed around among them over the *majiang*

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see Davis & Harrell 1993.

table. A Canadian couple I knew, having resided in Kunming for a couple of years, had a big collection of 'peasant hats' hung on the wall of their living room as a display. They told me that this collection attracted endless jeers from their Chinese visitors. Once a group of school children spelled out their disgust at the sight of the hats, "They are horrible! Why do you have them on your wall? They belong to peasants! Kunming people would never have them." For most *Kunming ren*, peasant hats are, at best, out of fashion and vulgar. They lack pretty embellishments like floral patterned hatbands. They are coarse and unrefined. For some, they are even abominable because of their association with peasants.[6] Objects tinted with even a slight suggestion of peasantry are often stigmatised in the eyes of *Kunming ren*. Paradoxically, however the sense of *tu* - the key characteristic of the peasantry - is precisely what makes Yunnan products popular to both tourists and art lovers.

The core meaning of the term '*tu*' is earth or soil. Its figurative meanings refer to things or people that are countrified or not refined. It is strongly associated with peasants and the countryside (see Fei 1991:5-11). The derogative term '*tu baozi*', lit. a bun stuffed with *tu*, is used to describe someone as a country bumpkin, or countrified clodhopper. To call someone '*tuqi*', which literally means to smell of *tu*, means s/he is rough and uncouth, unacquainted with the knowledge or manners of refined city folk. People who are thought unfamiliar with fashionable taste are often called '*laotu* (Old *tu*)'. One of my informants, a young architect who worked for the Kunming Design Bureau (*shi shejiyuan*), once said, "The TV news presenters in Kunming always look very *tuqi*." He was referring to their clothing being less modern-looking than the ones worn on central television channels. For the average *Kunming ren*, countryside is associated with backwardness and poverty. In a sense, *Kunming ren* see themselves as unattached to land or earth, and are often scornful toward it. Yet at the same time, Yunnan as a province in China is strongly associated with having an exotic flavour of earth (*you tuwei*). In fact, the province has a nickname *Hong Tudi* (Red Earth). A Shanghai businessman I met in Wase, a small fishing village near the

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[6] This aversion towards things *tu* can also been seen in the choice over films. Films from Hong Kong or Hollywood are tremendously popular. The types of award-winning Chinese films that are highly regarded in the West are generally unpopular in Kunming. Zhang Yimo and Gong Li are regarded as unexciting and *tu*. *Kunming ren* are not interested in the life of the country folk. When I was there, 'True Lies' swept through the city like a tornado. People were talking about it everywhere. In sharp contrast, Ermo, an award-winning *guochanpian* (Mainland Chinese produced films), attracted only a few that were concerned with the artistic value of cinema. Among them, the majority are foreigners in the city. Some criticise the Chinese Fifth Generation directors (*diwudai daoyan*) as indulging in their personal aesthetic whim and ignoring popular taste (Xiao 1995).

highland lake in Yunnan, Erhai, once told me "Until I arrived here, I did not think any place I have been to in Yunnan were as *tu* as I used to think Yunnan should be." Kunming was not *tu* enough for him, neither was Xiaguan (another relatively prosperous city in Yunnan). He rejoiced at experiencing the real sense of *tu* in the fishing village. In fact, Wase was one of the few villages on the shore of Erhai that was visited by foreign as well as *waidi* (Chinese from other provinces) tourists on their weekly or monthly market days. Its atmosphere of *tu* offered the sought-after quality of exoticness for tourists.[7] The flavour of *tu* is also the major selling point of works by Yunnan artists. It is the themes of national minorities and rural life as artistic motifs that distinguish their pieces from contemporary art works from other part of China. Kunming, as the modern provincial capital of Yunnan, is caught between these ambivalent sentiments toward earth, *tu*. While people from outside Yunnan are captured by the charm of Yunnan's *tuqi*, the majority of *Kunming ren* hold it in abhorrence.

2.1.4 Unreliable Botchers; Affordable Interior Designers

Mingong are heavily involved in the construction industry in the city,[8] mainly because of their relatively lower labour cost. However it would be misleading not to mention the skills involved in their work. It is precisely the wide-ranging skills they possess that render them indispensable to city dwellers, despite the negative feelings they evoke in *Kunming ren*. Apart from the large-scale labour force whirlpooling into the construction projects of urban development, *mingong's* presence is no less visible on the quotidian level of ordinary people's life. In the Labour Market (*laowu shichang*) in Kunming, one can pick *mingong* to do all sorts of work in the same way as one picks commercial goods in shops (Yu & Xiao 1995). It is common to see *mingongs* sitting on pavements with a piece of cardboard lying next to them. Written on the cardboard are large characters such as *zhuangxiu* (interior decoration), *shuaqi* (wall painting), *da jiaju* (making furniture), shop attendants (*dianyuan*), cooks (*pengren shi* or *chushi*) or *baomu* (baby-sitter/domestic servant) - designating the skills to be purchased. Because the trend of interior decoration (*zhuangxiu*, lit. means installing and fixing) was taking the city by a storm when I was there,

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[7] Schein (1997) coined this fascination of more cosmopolitan Chinese with "exotic" minority culture, for which Yunnan is famous, "internal orientalism".

[8] According to a report (Yu & Xiao 1995), the production rate per worker of a building company in Kunming tripled from 1984 to 1993 because a large number of *mingong*, instead of permanent city-dweller workers, were employed.

many people I knew had major or minor work done to their flats during my stay. The most common projects were painting, tiling, the laying of wooden floors and the building of fitted furniture. Balconies were also often incorporated into interior space, and either converted into a kitchen or an extra bedroom. All of the households I knew, without exception, employed *mingong* picked from the street to make the exciting changes to their domestic space. *Mingong* often boasted good decorative skills at a much lower price than from other sources, which became their major selling point. People planning to buy new furniture also searched among *mingong* on the street for better deals, because they claimed to be able to copy furniture styles found in department stores at a fraction of the price (ibid.).

Unfortunately, conflicts regularly occurred in the process of transforming domestic space. Complaints from employers were often about the poor workmanship, or *mingong*'s demand for more money, halfway through the job. According to Lan, her aunt had a prolonged and fierce bicker with the *mingong* she hired to decorate her home. She complained that the workers had deliberately not laid the tiles straight, but the workers retorted by describing her as unreasonably fussy. The situation became bleak when Lan's aunt refused to cook lunches for the *mingong* working inside her home, which was her part of the deal. As a result, the *mingong* protested by refusing to finish the work, leaving the flat in an uncompromising mess. In the end, they made mutual concessions so that the family could carry on with their lives. Ever since, Lan's aunt has never stopped preaching on the unreliable and lower nature of *mingong*. A young woman, nicknamed 'Swallow', working as an accountant for one of the most profitable building companies in Kunming, also had a bad experience with *mingong* employed to decorate her new flat. She paid the *mingong* in full in advance, only to be deserted with a half-finished flat. The *mingong* took all the money and ran away.

Horror stories about the unreliable nature of *mingong* were often circulated around as after-dinner chat material. A story goes like this. A university professor and his wife (also a professor) hired an eighteen-year-old domestic servant from the Yunnan countryside. The girl won the couple's trust by her meekness. Totally unexpectedly, she later ran away loading a pedicab full of valuable domestic appliances from her employers' home while the couple were lecturing in the university. I am not sure to what extent the stories are generated in popular newspapers and magazines, which can then be traced to someone's imagination and

thirst for melodrama. Nevertheless, one can be certain that the wide circulation of such tales does not come from thin air. The popularity of these horror stories alone certainly accounts for some popular attitudes of sociological significance.

Curiously, though, Kunming people are not really deterred by *mingong*'s potentially destructive tendency in spite of all the bad publicity. In spite of all their evils in the eyes of *Kunming ren*, *mingong* helps *Kunming ren* realise their dream life without having to pay a dream price. As Lan once said, 'You only have to give them a little bit of money to make them do almost anything for you.' To *Kunming ren*, the practical versatility of *mingong* is the converting device from a drab, dusty and cluttering life to the one glossed by modern fixtures. By plumbing, laying tiles or wooden floors, fitting fancy seated flush toilets, converting wasted balcony space into bright kitchens glistening with white tiles, the affordable versatility of unruly *mingong* renders a department store or soap opera lifestyle accessible to average *Kunming ren*. In other words, by rushing into the city to pursue their own dream of getting rich, these 'abhorred peasants' also help *Kunming ren* realise their dream lives.

Mingong are, in a word, versatile. They construct buildings, make furniture and often act as second-rate interior designers. They are the main motor for progress and economic development in the city. Without them, the construction industry in Chinese cities could not possibly glide forward at a such dazzling speed. However, the city people (as well as the government) believe that their versatility and productivity has to be monitored, otherwise they easily become botchers and destructors. Their productivity is extremely useful, yet at the same time, dangerous. For *Kunming ren*, they constitute a threat to order and trust. Nevertheless, they also pave the way to a grandiose dream world. The inherent love/hate relationship between *Kunming ren* and *mingong* cannot be more pronounced.

What concerns me here about the relationship between *mingong* and *Kunming ren* is how it situates the notion of *wenhua* in concrete terms. I have been describing everyday examples of the hostility of *Kunming ren* towards *mingong*. The reason behind the *mingong*'s unanimous unpopularity has some plausible explanations. One may suspect that competition for limited job opportunities may partially account for the general hostility. But this amounts to, at most, a partial explanation since the local community and the influx

community have rather distinct slots in the job market. The jobs that *mingong* often assume are generally disdained by urban dwellers (see Solinger 1995:128-9).[9] As described by *Kunming ren* themselves, the influx workers take up jobs that *Kunming ren* would not condescend themselves to do. In fact, the relationship between the two groups is more symbiotic than competitive in this respect. The second explanation is that *mingong* introduce an element of chaos to the urban order. This is certainly what *Kunming ren* believe. My informant who worked for a jewellery company told me,

> "The general impression of *Kunming ren* towards *mingong* is repulsion and disgust (*fangan*). They are regarded as the subversive element that disrupt the stability of society (*zaocheng shehui bu anding de yinsu*). Basically, most of them cannot find work in the city, so they resort to stealing and robbery. They don't have city *hukou*, so they are hard to manage and control. Because it's hard to track them down after they commit crimes, they are particularly audacious (*danzi jiaoda*), especially those Sichuan and Guizhou (the province on the eastern border of Yunnan) *mingong*. They are more likely to commit crimes. They rob you in the street and get involved in brawls (*qunou*)."

This is also the official line. The influx community is always blamed for the violation of civilian regulations and crimes. The area near Kunming train station, where a lot of *mingong* loiter, is regarded as a very bad and dangerous area.[10] But as mentioned earlier, *mingong* are definitely not the only people who disturb civilian order or commit crimes. Their place as habitual scapegoat brings out the third and perhaps the main reason for the unanimous hostility towards *mingong*.[11] The reason resides in how *mingong* are habitually marked out from *Kunming ren* by *Kunming ren* themselves. My informant who worked for a jewellery company once told me:

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[9] According to Solinger, about 30 percent of *mingong* earn their living on construction projects; around 22 percent peddle in produce markets; some 18.5 percent of them engage in "household service" as nursemaids; and 6 percent repair shoes, bicycles, knives, and pots and pans. Other jobs that attract *mingong* are: coal delivery, garbage collecting, sanitation works, street performing, restaurant work, and handicrafts and furniture manufacture (Solinger 1995:114-5).

[10] Chinese authorities claim that between the third and 40 percent of the criminal cases involve migrant workers (Solinger 1995:124). However, as Solinger rightly warns us, the reliability of such figures is questionable because of the propensity of the police to target and blame outsiders for crimes (ibid.). Some scholars suggest that much of the crimes committed by migrant workers is a substitute for political protest as a result of their poor living/working conditions in the city and lack of complaint channels (see Solinger 1995:124).

[11] The urban/rural inequalities in the PRC mentioned at the beginning of the chapter must have also contributed to the hostility of *Kunming ren* towards *mingong* (of rural origin).

> "*Mingong* are filthy (*zang*) and their behaviour is uncivilised (*bu wenming*). Compared to them, *Kunming ren* are much more civilised (*jiao wenming*). Maybe you have noticed yourself that *mingong*'s bodily movements are much more pronounced (*dongzuo da*).[12] I mean, for example, when they ride bikes, they dash about like mad. Many bike accidents are caused by this recklessness. And, they don't pay much attention to the maintenance of their bikes either. I mean, they don't fix their bikes when there are problems. Who knows, maybe a lot of their bikes are stolen. Their manners are very rough, uncouth and wild (*cuye*)."

Here he used the term *wenming*. Often, *wenhua* and *wenming* (lit. enlightened by *wen*, normally translated as "civilized") are used to imply one another. However, there is a difference between how the two terms are used. People with *wenhua* (*you wenhua de ren*) are always very *wenming*, but being *wenming* does not always imply a high level of *wenhua*. In a general sense, to say somebody *you wenhua* (lit. to have *wenhua*) is to imply that s/he is comparatively well read, interested in arts and literature and has refined tastes. The term *hen wenming* (very civilized) refers to someone's civilized behaviour and genteel manners.[13] The same informant also told me that one could easily distinguish *Kunming ren* from *mingong* from their appearance.

> "*Mingong* often wear dirty clothes. Their clothing tends to be out of fashion, drab in colour, and often worn out. Their hair is unkempt and filthy. This has a lot to do with their education level (*jiaoyu shuiping*). Many people in *nongcun* (farming rural areas or villages) have very low *jiaoyu shuiping*, with formal education at elementary school level (*xiaoxue*) at most. Really, it's a vicious cycle, because if their *wenhua chengdu* (cultural level, *chengdu* means 'standard') is low, then it's harder for them to find work in the city. Even if they are lucky enough to get work, the pay won't be good."

Similar attitudes toward the appearance of *mingong* are mentioned by Solinger. "With respect to Chinese on the move, local snobbishness may single out the tasteless garb of the bumpkin, or the peasant's sun-darkened skin" (1995:121). Solinger also graphically

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[12] Mayfair Yang also mentioned that working-class people have more pronounced physical movement (Yang 1994:137).

[13] Above all, to be *wenming* is the top priority in the education of the general public. To be *wenming* is not to spit in the street, not to curse and argue, not to dispose of garbage in the wrong place, not to occupy public space for personal use, and not to transgress traffic regulations. The notion of *wenming* is intimately knitted with the ideology of modernization in the PRC. This is true for both official propaganda and the popular beliefs of average city dwellers. In China, modernity and *xiandaihua* are not just about nurturing capitalism or the transformation of material culture. It is, on the official agenda, an education project on lifestyle in a broad sense. The project infiltrates the minutest details of everyday life.

quotes a public security officer in Beijing: "These out-of-towners are no better than animals" (ibid.:135). There are several interesting points raised by my informant's comments, such as the comparison in bodily movements, manners, and his attribution of all the negative characteristics of *mingong* to their educational and cultural level. For *Kunming ren*, *mingong* are thought to be, by and large, ill-educated. As a result, their *wenhua shuiping* is also very low.

Although *mingong* are a common target of scorn by *Kunming ren*, because they are seen to have low *wenhua shuiping*, they are not the only target. The widening income gap between people in business and those who are not has caused many grudges. Scornful comments from *zhishi fenzi* [lit. peoples who have knowledge, a term that equates to people with *wenhua*. In China the category includes anyone who has been to colleges or even high schools], against the *nouvaux riches*, or those who have benefited financially from the economic reform, are very common. Rao Guang, a retired cadre who has a college degree, once told me,

> "Nowadays there are plenty of upstarts (*baofa hu*, lit. households who have become prosperous at an explosive speed) in China. Maybe some of the *nouveau riches* acquired their wealth through hard work, but I think these people are few and far between. Those opportunists make their fortune by immoral means. They are rich materially but poor inside. What do you think they do once they get rich? They go to the *jiujia* [literally means houses where spirits and alcohol is served. They are closely associated with prostitution in China], *geting* [lit. means halls where people sing songs for entertainment, also regarded as the nest of prostitutes, referred to as "chicken-for-sale"] and Karaoke. If you ever get to see these places, you will know that they are packed with this sort of people. But we *zhishi fenzi* still have the backbone. Poor or rich, we feel that one should carry on living all the same, abiding by the same moral standard. We would not bend our waists for the sake of five *dou* of rice [*buwei wudoumi zheyao,* meaning not to condescend oneself for livelihood. *Dou* is a unit of dry measure for grains]."

The implication of this: because intellectuals are well educated and have high level of *wenhua*, they are less likely to be corrupted by material temptation. They can stride against the current of degeneration. According to Rao Guang, *zhishi fenzi* (the representative of people with *wenhua*) are the proud defenders of the moral high ground in an age of moral decay brought about by the economic reform. At least on the ideological level, they prefer to think so. In reality, however, so-called *zhishi fenzi*, those with higher

educational level, are also rushing into the sea of capitalism and joining the game of accumulation. The *xiahai*[14] phenomenon tells us a different story from what people like Rao Guang like to believe. Plenty of *laoban* (people who own their own business) were *zhishi fenzi* to start with.[15]

The examples of *mingong* and *nouveaux riches* highlight that *wenhua* level is often seen as an explanation of despised behaviour. But what does wenhua level mean?

2.2 The Notion of *Wenhua*

The term *wenhua* is composed of two different characters *wen* and *hua*. *Hua* means the act of transformation. It is often attached to a noun or an adjective to form a verb. Terms composed this way generally refer to the process of turning one thing into another. They imply change. The prefix (noun or adjective) denotes the direction of change, or the state to be aimed at.[16] *Wenhua* therefore indicates a transformation towards the state of *wen*. Clearly, the crux of the term *wenhua* really depends on the character *wen*. The notion of *wen* and its place in tractional Chinese society has received plenty of scholarly attention (Bray 1997; Zito 1997, etc.). It would not be an overstatement to say that Confucian values are, or are at least claimed to be, hinged on the notion of *wen*. *Wen* lies at the very centre of orthodox elite culture. Within the wide and ever-expanding literature on *wen*, however, most studies use ancient texts as source material. Few are based on everyday speech and practice in contemporary settings. My study on the notion of *wen* and *wenhua* in this chapter should be seen as complementing the existing literature by incorporating the popular conception and practice. I shall begin with an investigation into the contemporary use of the term *wenhua*.

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[14] A popular contemporary term to mean the plunge into capitalist endeavours. To start a business of any scale is called *xiahai*, to plunge into the sea.

[15] In the eyes of *Kunming ren*, to be a *laoban* is the equivalent to being rich. *Laoban* has become a social category.

[16] For example, to modernise is called '*xiandaihua*', with the prefix '*xiandai*' meaning 'modern'. To industrialise is called '*gongyehua*', with the prefix *gongye* meaning industry.

2.2.1 Contemporary Use of the Term Wenhua

People often comment on the level of *wenhua* (*wenhua shuiping*) of others. But what do the Chinese mean when they talk about *wenhua*? How is the term *wenhua* realised in contemporary everyday speech? I asked my informant who worked for a jeweller company what he meant by calling someone '*you wenhua*' (lit. to have *wenhua*). He answered without hesitation, "*You wenhua* means that one's *xueli* (formal schooling qualification) is high. One's *wenhua shuiping* often refers to one's *xueli*." I then asked him how he would apply the term to imperial times when a formal schooling system did not exist. He told me,

> "In imperial times, *you wenhua* was related to *gongming* ['*gong*' means merit and '*ming*' means name and reputation; '*gongming*' refers to scholarly honour or official rank during the imperial era]. You needed to be on or above the level of *xiucai* (one who had passed the imperial examination at the county level in the Ming and Qing dynasties) to be called *you wenhua*."[17]

When the subject first appeared in a casual everyday setting, I was surprised that *Kunming ren* literally equated *wenhua shuiping* with formal education level, i.e., *xueli*. For example, people would say "so-and-so's *wenhua shuiping* is higher than mine", when they literally meant that "so-and-so is better educated than me in terms of formal education". However, it became obvious to me later that the relationship between formal education and *you wenhua* in popular conception was not as exclusive as was implied by most people's verbal responses. Possibly, the equation of *wenhua shuiping* and education level may be the easiest thing to say. People generally think that having received higher formal education implies that one should *you wenhua*. What *you wenhua* really implies comes in a package. It includes, most importantly, that one should be well read and knowledgeable about arts such as painting and calligraphy. However, *you wenhua* is a relative term. To an illiterate person, to be literate alone may already qualify one as *you wenhua*; whereas for a literate person, the threshold is higher.

Wenhua also has a variety of meanings in everyday life. When one says that a place has a flavour of *wenhua* (*you wenhua qixi*), it often means that there are plenty of objects

[17] For a full treatment on the composition and dynamics of the Chinese gentry and qualifications through imperial examination degrees, see Ho 1962; Chang 1955; Esherick & Rankin 1990. On the place of the examination system in incorporating the population, see Elman & Woodside 1994.

that are symbolic of *wenhua* around. For example, in a newspaper article entitled "The culturalisation fad in interior decoration (*jiaju zhuangshi wenhua re*)", the author wrote, "The fact that *wenhua* is entering the domestic space can be seen, first, in the drastic increase in the quantity of books and magazines found in the domestic environment... Not only do books occupy more and more space in domestic territory, they have also become popular decorative items. Second, it is seen in the *zihua* (calligraphy and brush painting) hung on walls. How refined, and how elegant!" (Xiao 1995; cf. Ye 1995). In another article, the author claims that there has been a mushrooming of bookshops and bookstalls in Kunming. He concludes, "the *wenhua pinwei* (the taste in *wenhua*) of a city is indicated, to a large extent, by the number of bookshops and people who read regularly. From this perspective, Kunming people's desire for knowledge and *wenhua* is very strong, and the *wenhua pingwei* of the whole city is quite high" (Mai 1995). Clearly, people think of things such as books, painting and calligraphy as among the most typical symbols of *wenhua*.

Another example of how *wenhua* has acquired wider usage is illustrated by the way people have started to talk about the *wenhua* of teahouses (*chaguan wenhua*) (Zhang & Huang 1995; see also San 1995)[18] or the *wenhua* of a public squares (*guangchang wenhua*) (Zhang 1995) in the city. In this case, *wenhua* seems to mean an ensemble of activities circumscribed in a geographic area or centred around a location. Moreover, people also talk about the *wenhua* of the resurgent fascination with forms of popular mysticism such as paranormal power (*teyi gongneng*), *qigong* (a system of breathing exercises), eight-trigram fortune telling (*bagua suanming*), and geomancy (*fengshui*) (Xiao 1995; see also Wu 1995). Another example is linked to pop music and cinema (Xiao 1995; Ye 1995). In this case, it

[18] According to the author, tea-rooms/teahouses (*chashi* or *chaguan*) have proudly returned to Kunming. In an old teahouse located in the flower-and-bird market (*huaniao shichang*), pensioners gather to chat, play Chinese chess, cards or *majiang* every day. This teahouse existed before the Liberation, but was closed down during the Cultural Revolution. Now it has reopened, and again provides a relaxed socialising environment. Apart from these traditional teahouses, upmarket tea-rooms are located within the Jade Lake Park (*Cuihu Gongyuan*), in the vicinity of which one can find the most sought after commercially built residential apartments. The park boasts a traditional Chinese garden layout (characterised by a labyrinth of water, pavilions, arched bridges, floating lotuses and willows) and an emerald green lake garnished with small farm houses of yellow ochre walls and cadmium red tiles made of baked clay. The characteristic garden style environment in the middle of the city quickly attracts businessmen's attention. In just three years, seven tearooms have opened in the park. Not only do people come here to chat and play *majiang* while sipping tea, traditional opera fans gather regularly to 'hang their voices' [*diao sangzi* , to exercise their voices] with an entire band. Around them tourists' attention gravitates. In a way it is almost the central stage of the park. On the stage, opera fans entertain themselves. Off the stage, they accidentally entertain a huge inadvertent audience.

is rather close to 'popular culture' in English. There are also terms such as *jiu wenhua* (the *wenhua* of alcohol), *shi wenhua* (food *wenhua*), *cha wenhua* (tea *wenhua*) circulated in the mass media. However, in Kunming, these terms were not used in everyday speech. When people actually talk about *wenhua*, it is generally the first usage that they mean, i.e., formal education level or something symbolised by books, painting and calligraphy. It is the mass media that propagates the new meanings. The term has also broadened to mean the customs and lifestyles of national minorities in Yunnan - *shaoshu minzu wenhua* - a familiar usage to anthropologists. However, this contrasts with the common description of national minorities as *meiyou wenhua* (without *wenhua*). The latter seems to be a more widespread attitude than regarding the national minorities as having their own distinct *wenhua*. The use of *wenhua* for its new range of meanings appears to be an acquired habit. The recent expansion of these meanings can be clearly observed. Though dazzled by the semantic fecundity of the term, it is possible to trace back to its semantic core. This is the association with *wen*.

2.2.2 Wenhua: Transformed by Writing

As indicated earlier, the crux of the notion of *wenhua* lies in the concept of *wen*. Bray notes that "Civilisation and civility are concepts that both correspond to the Chinese term *wen*, which also signifies cultivation, refinement, literary competence and written texts" (Bray 1997:171). Zito indicates that "*Wen* in a narrow sense meant 'text' or 'writing' and, more expansively, cosmic patterning that included activities such as painting and music in order to mobilize the human sensorium beyond the eye" (Zito 1997:58). Neither of these descriptions capture the full meanings of the term. Here, I will approach from a more generic angle. Predictably, the Chinese character *wen* has a multiplicity of meanings, such as script, written characters, language, literary composition, literary language (as opposed to colloquial or vernacular language), being gentle or refined as Bray notes, as well as to cover up or to gloss over. The most literal meaning of the character *wen* as 'literary composition or writing' is further stretched to imply a state of refinement and gentility - qualities supposedly learnt and acquired as a result of exposure to *wen*. From this state of polished or cultivated delicacy, the character later acquired yet another layer of meaning - to paint or to veneer over the authentic and raw material of one's given nature (*zhi*). Naïvety is coated with layers of sophistication. What lies at the semantic core of the character *wen* is precisely this slow process of polishing, carving, refining, waxing and glazing of self. To

be more precise, *wen* means to transform the natural or raw self into the social and cultural self that glistens with the gloss of accumulated heritage.[19] It seems that the development of the semantic maps of the character can be roughly traced this way. First, lying at the root of its semantic proliferation is the meaning of 'writing', either as written characters or literary composition. From writing germinates the notion of refining and polishing over raw material. *Wen*, when referring to manners or bodily propensities, also implies the gentility of bodily movements. It implies the absence of rough edges and exaggerated movements. This gentle bodily temperament, the polishing and refining of the raw self, are seen as the benefits of converting oneself into a believer and follower of the world of writing. In a literal sense, *wenhua* can be glossed as "transformed by writing/written characters", or "to take the form of writing/written characters" (cf. Bloch 1989). And *you* (have) *wenhua* is to have undergone the transformation by *wen*. In spite of the complexity of its contemporary meaning, the term '*wenhua*' for the Chinese cannot be severed from writing/*wenzi*. The semantic make-up of the term *wenhua* highlights the assumption in China that 'writing' is at the core of 'being cultured' and "the concept of 'civil' in China evolved from that of 'writing'" (Hannas 1997:301). In other words, the civilizing process in a Chinese sense is literally the process of achieving *wen* characteristics.

The central role of writing and written characters in the Chinese civilizing process can also be seen in the primacy of 'recognizing written characters (*shizi*)' in the education system. Before an institutionalised education machinery was introduced, a common way to enquire about a child's stage of development was to ask whether s/he can *shizi*. Now, as a result of widespread public education, the question has become whether a child has started going to school. Schooling implies the ability to 'recognise written characters'. Leung (1985:393) mentions that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "Except for those who entered school already knowing some characters, the first thing to be learned in school was to recognize characters and to review them regularly after they were taught." Even though plenty of other skills are taught in school, the ability to recognise written characters is singled out as the key benefit of schooling. This is confirmed by what my informant, the one who worked for an provincial newspaper, told me,

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[19] I should point out the ambivalence in the concept of "the core (*zhi*)". The core is at the same time good and bad. Although pure nature is bad because it is not nurtured by *wen*, pure *wen*, therefore with nature completely lost, is equally unfavourable. It is the balance of the two that is valuable.

> "The first and the most important thing about receiving education (*shou jiaoyu*) is to *shizi*. After that, there is also getting to learn knowledge of other kinds. But it all begins with *shizi*. What I mean by knowledge of other kinds is something like, for example, political knowledge (*zhengzhi zhishi*). This is composed of facts that the nation must make you accept. Take this for example, when I was small, the first lesson in our language (*yuwen*) textbook is written as this: 'Long live Chairman Mao (*Mao zhuxi wansui*)'; then it is 'Long live Chairman Hua' in the second paragraph; then 'Long live Chinese Communist Party' in the third and 'Long live Socialism' in the fourth. For this reason, the first written character we learned to write was '*mao*', and the second one was '*zhu*' then '*xi*' [these three characters in order mean Chairman Mao]."

His reply was obviously far richer than what is required by the concern of my subject. The first thing he pointed out was the primacy of *shizi* in the process of receiving education.[20] This informant, like most people, had the tendency to provide the easiest answer to a question first. Then he realised the existence of alternatives and the complexity of the matter, so he moved on to explain them. The sequence of responses, I suggest, is as much a source of information as their contents. According to the 'prototype theory of concept formation' (Smith *et al.* 1988:372), examples that lie at the core of a concept/category are the 'best exemplars' of the concept/category, which "anchor loosely-formed 'families' of specific instances" (Bloch 1991:185). There is no reason why this cannot be applied to the verbal response triggered by a question. In other words, the part an answer uttered first tends to be the prototype of all answers one has to a question. They are most easily retrievable simply because they 'fit' the question best.[21] Put another way, the first response is generally more prototypical than the following ones. If this proposition is accepted, then 'to *shizi*' is apparently the most prototypical answer to the question of what it means to receive education. An illiterate woman in her late twenties with two children, living in a small village near the highland lake Erhai in Yunnan, once told me, "I will definitely send both of my children to school, so that they can *shizi*." This is just one of many examples. People rarely say that they will send their children to school to learn algebra, geography or history. When they think of going to school, the first thing they expect to learn is the ability

[20] It is also very interesting that he thought the political knowledge he received as "facts that a nation must make you accept." This view suggests that people can comfortably 'learn about' a set of facts, knowing they are not as unquestionable as they are claimed to be. Interesting though it may be, I am obliged to focus the discussion on my subject for now.

[21] They are best in terms of one-to-one question-response format, though perhaps not in terms of the depth and complexity they cover.

to recognise written characters, *shizi*. As Thompson put it, "Literacy is seen as the key metonym of school-certified competence, the key criterion by which attainment is measured and evaluated. Maturity is, in school terms, assessed in literacy skills. Illiterates, in terms of the school's normative gaze, are regarded as incompetent human beings, as rejects" (Thompson 1990:116).

2.2.3 Becoming a Person through Wen

The civilizing process is at the same time the process of *xue zuoren* - learning to become a person. As Stafford points out, studying and becoming a person (*zuoren*) are seen as inseparable (1995:56-58). Similarly, Thompson argues that the acquisition of *wen*, i.e., the civilizing process through *wen*, is coterminous with the process of 'properly becoming a person'[22]:

> "Commitment to learning, and to self-cultivation, is essential to the process of authentic ageing, of properly becoming a person. The effort is life-long and unceasing. Education, nourishment of the mind, was thus rated very highly in Neo-Confucian thought. This sort of authentic maturation was portrayed as a ripening process. The word for being born, *sheng*, also 'raw' or 'uncooked' or 'unripe', and so ripening is a natural metaphor. But the word for 'ripe', *shu*, has other definite connotations. *Shengfan* is the term for uncivilised barbarian, whilst *shufan*, literally 'ripe' or 'cooked' barbarian, is used for barbarians who have adopted Chinese civilisation. By this account, the process of maturation is coterminous with the acquisition of 'culture' (*wen*). The character *wen*, however, has as a constituent part of its meaning, an inextricable association with writing on the one hand, and sinification on the other. Thus, on this continuum of maturation, becoming 'older' (i.e., becoming more human, more a person) is associated with sinification, acculturation and literacy, all considered an ineluctable part of the process of humanisation and self-cultivation... On the other hand, the illiterate, or the uncultured, is seen as incomplete human beings, as relatively immature by this grammatocratic scale. Ageing should be a process of nearing 'completion', 'perfection'." (Thompson 1990:112)

In other words, to move up the continuum of becoming a person is equivalent to the process of *wenhua* - to be transformed by *wen* and to take up *wen* characteristics. To take the form of writing is to receive all the knowledge carried in writing as well as to 'embody' all the "qualities associated with *wen* - refinement, self-control, moral purity, a thorough knowledge

[22] Self-cultivation is seen in Confucian ideas as the prerequisite to authentically becoming human (Tu 1983:58). In other words, to be human has to be learnt.

of proper behaviour" (Bray 1997:376).[23] In other words, writing is not epiphenomenal in Chinese culture. It is central to what makes a person a 'proper Chinese person'.

Reverting to the relationship between *Kunming ren* and *mingong*, which was set out to stage the notion of *wenhua* in concrete terms: on the continuum of becoming a person peasants/*mingong* are, in the eyes of *Kunming ren*, placed on the lower end and the city people (*Kunming ren*) on the higher end. *Mingong* - peasants in the city - are seen by *Kunming ren* as filthy (*zang*), rude (*culu*), stupid (*ben*), immoral (*mei daode*) and prone to crime because they have no *wenhua*.[24] If to become more human or a more proper person is to move up on the ladder of acculturation and literacy, then *mingong* (considered to be low on the continuum of *wenhua* acquisition) are understandably categorised as incomplete because they have not been transformed by *wen* and have not succeeded in acquiring *wen*-related characteristics.[25] In other words, *mingong*, in the eyes of *Kunming ren*, are taken to be the equivalent of the uncivilised barbarians, lacking in genuine civilization. Before they are "cooked" by knowledge in the form of writing, they are seen as deficient and blanketed in ignorance. As a result, stupidity (*yu*), poverty (*pin*) and sickness (*bing*) are seen to be the characteristics of peasants (*xiangxia ren*) by the Chinese (Fei 1991:12).[26]

Another issue of fundamental importance is the gender difference in this conceptualisation of personhood. According to Bray (1997), the values related to the acquisition of *wen* were shared by women, albeit there may be different expressions of *wen* quality for them in everyday life. In late imperial China, the dominant strand of thought

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[23] This point will be further elaborated in chapter 5.

[24] An interesting parallel can be found in Shanghainese attitudes toward Subei people (Honig 1990). Honig notes that to be called a *Subei ren* in contemporary Shanghai is to be identified as poor, ignorant, dirty and vulgar. People from Subei, a region stereotyped for its backwardness, like *mingong* in Kunming, constitute the conceptual other for absorbing all negative attributes.

[25] The contrast between elite refinement and peasant strength can also be seen in the physical differentiation reflected in popular conception in late imperial times. The elite women were portrayed as delicate, frail and almost unhealthily slender. In contrast, the physical frame of peasant women was supposed to be robust. Medical texts on gynaecology in late imperial China explicitly distinguished between the childbearing capacities of women of different classes. "Women of gentle birth were represented as frail and inherently less fertile, likely to suffer terribly in childbirth; peasant women were naturally fertile and gave birth without trouble - the babies just popped out like 'ripe melons'"(Bray 1997:350).

[26] This is also the official line of reasoning. The Chinese government has always argued that China cannot practise democracy because the majority of its huge population are under-educated therefore incapable of making reasonable decisions. Rey Chow suggests that backwardness is often projected onto the more repressed members of Chinese society - women, children, servants, and peasants - as a result of the impotence of the Chinese literati confronted by the modern West (Chow 1989:153-4).

stressed that "status and merit depended on a range of diffuse manifestations of respectability or refinement, *wen*, theoretically available to all through learning, self-cultivation, and proper behaviour... These activities and attributes are not confined to men - women were also defined by degrees of *wen*" (ibid.:373). Women participated in the acquisition of *wen*, however, not necessarily through literacy and related activities, but through a "rich repertoire" of "nonliterate forms of education", such as work (embroidery), physical segregation, bound feet, ritual signs and symbols, etc. (Mann 1994). This, however, does not necessarily imply that there is no gender difference in relation to becoming a person through *wen*. It is also possible that the sharing of *wen*-related values between genders is a conclusion reached from a predominantly male perspective (i.e. searching for a female parallel of a male ideology). Further discussion on this issue requires more extensive investigation, which hopefully may be dealt with in other works to follow.

The social hierarchy of *wenhua*, or the "social hierarchy of refinement" in Bray's words (1997:374), reveals itself not only on a vertical plane (ascending towards the peak of *wenhua*), but also on a horizontal plane. To my great annoyance (being Taiwanese in Yunnan), I was told several times, by Chinese from the East Coast (Beijing, Shanghai, and Suzhou respectively) that neither Taiwan nor Yunnan had *wenhua* (*meiyou wenhua*). They wondered why I went to Kunming to do fieldwork on calligraphy. Their logic is that one cannot research calligraphy (or more accurately in their understanding, learn from calligraphy), a symbol of *wenhua*, in a place where there was no *wenhua*. Leaving personal annoyance aside, there is obviously a perceived geographical hierarchy of *wenhua* in China. Historically, "a cultural core area was first located in the Wei River Valley, a tributary of the Yellow River, and later encompassing parts of the Yangtze River" (Tu 1994:2). In contemporary popular conception, the nodal points of cultural distribution are to be found in a multiplicity of geographical cores such as Beijing, Shanghai or Suzhou.[27] The further away from these conceptual cores of *wenhua* a place is, the lower it is on the geographical hierarchy of *wenhua*. The implication is that places, as well as people, have and are ranked by *wenhua*. It also implies that when distant from the geographical source of potency, there is little chance to equip oneself with *wenhua*. This is not unrelated to the attitude towards barbarians (*fan*). Barbarians are those who come from regions far from the geographic cores

[27] It should be made clear that I am not talking about the cultural cores in the sense used by archaeologists, i.e., geographical locations where civilization germinated.

of *wenhua*.[28] It brings us to yet another implication of Thompson's argument quoted earlier, i.e., the issue of sinification. As well as being crucial to becoming a person, *wen* is also crucial to becoming a Chinese person. As a result, *wen* is also a key element in the definition of Chineseness.

Wenhua, to take the form of writing, has to be acquired through two major channels: One is the extensive collection of writing in forms of literature, history and ritual texts. The other one is written characters *per se*. Since the former category has always been a major concern in sinology, I do not wish to discuss it further here. I will explore, instead, how to move up on the ladder of *wenhua* by ascending the tower of knowledge in written characters *per se*.

2.3 Ascending the Tower of Deep Knowledge

> *"Ideograms do not only have sets of accepted signification. Because Chinese literature, as indeed other native forms of intellectual and artistic activity, has always been fascinated by examples and precedents of the past, including the most archaic, idiographic expression has acquired very early the capacity to convey various layers of meaning. To the illiterate or semiliterate, it unfolds like a painted scroll, revealing its beauties and its mysteries as one advances in knowledge."*
>
> (de Beaufort 1978:50)

2.3.1 The Deep Knowledge of Written Characters

Written characters are in themselves objects of rumination. My calligrapher informant in Kunming, Yao, once told me about his theory on the relationship between the eight diagrams (*bagua*) and the graphic logic of written characters (in regular script). He said,

[28] In recent years, some scholars have argued that the cultural cores of the Chinese are located on the periphery, i.e., among the Chinese diaspora and the symbolic universe of individuals "who try to understand China intellectually and bring their understanding of China to their own linguistic communities" (Tu 1994:13-4).

"The ninefold square (*jiugong*) (Fig. 2.1a) is the same as the eight directions in the *mi*-character diagram (*mizi ge*)(Fig. 2.1b).[29] The middle square (*zhonggong*) in the ninefold square is the same as the centre point of the *mi*-character diagram. In the Eight Trigrams (*bagua*), the north is water; east wood; south fire; west gold and the middle earth. The fire-radical (*huo*), e.g., in the character *ran* (to burn) (Fig. 2.1d), is always placed at the bottom of a character because that is the position of fire [bottom is south in the thought of *Yijing*, the Book of Change] (Fig. 2.1f). Moreover, why are the four dots of the character *yu* (rain) placed in the way that they are [not parallel to each other, but something like radiating from the centre] (Fig. 2.1e)? If you place the *mi*-character diagram on top of the ninefold square (Fig. 2.1c), then you will see the four directions suitable for the four dots in *yu* character. There are many other examples, but I won't go on further. Just think. China was such a vast country at the time when written characters were invented. Why did people everywhere adopt similar forms for their written characters?[30] There must have been an underlying logic to the invention of characters, otherwise the graphic forms of written characters would have been totally random. This logic is, I believe, to be found in *yijing bagua* (the Book of Change and the Eight Trigrams). I've just given you a couple of examples. Only you and my students have heard what I just told you. I didn't make this up. Wherever I go, my theory can stand up to challenges. Whenever I see a piece of calligraphy, even when people keep complementing it, I still think, if you don't understand the deep meaning of written characters, you don't really know about Chinese writing. The deep meaning of written characters is what I have just told you, i.e., the base of written characters in *Yijing bagua*. To really understand written characters is to grasp this level of meaning."[31]

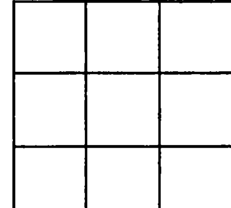


Fig. 2.1a Ninefold square (*jiugong ge*).

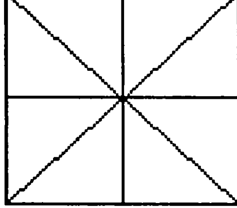


Fig. 2.1b *Mi*-character diagram (*mizi ge*).

[29] Both the ninefold square and the *mi*-character diagram are used as guiding formats for the learning of calligraphic composition. They help the learner to grasp the positions of constituent strokes in relation to each other.

[30] Before the first emperor of Qin (*qin shihuang*) normalised the script, there were different written scripts in different geological areas (see Willetts 1958:562-581).

[31] What Yao said, it seems to me, is not just about the deep knowledge of written characters, it also suggests the existence of an *essence* of the deep meaning of written characters. Put another way, linguistic or semantic meanings are of secondary order. They are appearance within which the *essence* of a character is buried. In this sense, the acquisition of *wenhua* also involves a process of penetrating the shield of appearance to reveal the *essence* of written characters.

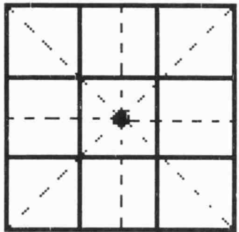
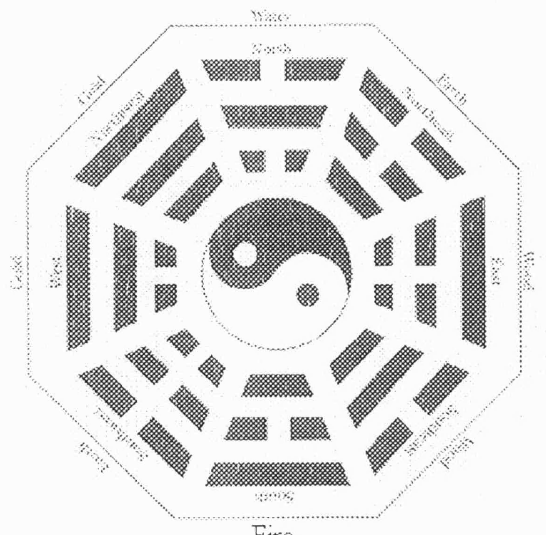


Fig. 2.1c Ninefold square superimposed with *mi*-character diagram.

Fig. 2.1d The fire-radical (*huo*), e.g. in the character *ran* (to burn) is always placed at the bottom of a character.

Fig. 2.1e The four dots of the character *yu* (rain) are placed so that they are not parallel to one another, but radiate from the centre.



ELEMENT	DIRECTIONS
Wood	East
Fire	South
Earth	Central
Gold	West
Water	North

Fig. 2.1f South is the position of fire. (Source: Lip 1997:41)

The deep knowledge of calligraphy/written characters, as he conceives it, is to be found in the *Yijing bagua*. However, for some calligraphy practitioners, the deep meaning of written characters is found in the actual execution of calligraphy, i.e., one comes in touch with the 'profound truth of written characters' through the act of writing, although writing the characters does not necessarily lead to the profound truth. Different people may have different opinions about how to unravel the deeper meanings of written characters. What really matters is that it is 'assumed' to be an almost 'theological' version of the deep meaning behind calligraphy/written characters. I say 'assumed' because once you have succeeded in unravelling a character's deeper meaning, there is a sense that there is always a still deeper meaning waiting to be deciphered.

There are several standard ways to extract the deep knowledge of calligraphy and written characters. The first approach is through philosophical interpretation. Yao's understanding can be put in this category as it assumes that the generative logic of the graphic formation of written characters can be explained by the overarching *Yijing bagua* cosmology. The revelatory power of written characters, to be discussed in chapter 6, can also be subsumed under this category.

The second source is through the unearthing of antiquated semantic meanings, i.e., the etymology of Chinese characters. The written form of Chinese characters has been changing since they made their début on the historical stage (Dong 1993; Zhan 1994; Willetts 1958; Chiang 1954). With each change of written form, the characters are seen to be endowed with new meanings that reflect changes in the sociocultural environment. As a result, written characters as a whole constitute a fecund reservoir of ancient ideas and a record of social history. An American, who spent eight years learning Chinese in Kunming, thought that Chinese characters were far better at storing the secrets of the past, because there was a residue of history preserved in every character, coded in miniature pictures. So he concluded that when the Chinese read and write, they are in touch with some aspect of Chinese history. This is also how the Chinese see their own written characters. Each written character is treated as a fossil that records and preserves the past. Prior to its modern appearance, a character may have undergone a succession of previous lives, i.e., different written forms. By tracing the development of the written forms of a character, changes in related ideas and social institutions can be uncovered. This 'archaeology of written

characters' is widely practised in Chinese scholarship (cf. Hannas 1998:5). For example, it is common for the archaic written forms of architecture-related characters to be used as evidence of how ancient architectural forms appeared (Zeng 1988; Wang 1989). Another good example concerns the effort to 'recover' the essential meaning of the notion of beauty. When discussing the notion beauty (*mei*), Chinese scholars tend to start by tracing back to early written forms of the character *mei*, in the hope of unravelling the original as well as essential meaning of the notion `beauty'. The conclusion they derive from this reconstruction of the past is that: Beauty was closely related to the idea of big and fleshy goats (*yang*) (Zhang 1992:124-125; Jin 1994:10; Xu 1963). The argument is that, based on the various written forms found in the oracle bone script (*jiagu wen*), the persistent element in all these different forms of the character *mei* is the character *yang* (goat) (Fig. 2.2). In fact, the character *mei* can be seen as the combination of two other characters, i.e., *yang* (goat) and *da* (big), therefore the notion of *mei*/beauty is related to the idea of 'big goat'. It is said to reflect the dominant livelihood of the people when the character was created. According to these writers, for people who led an agricultural or pastoral subsistence, beauty was closely related to the sight of big and fleshy goats - an indication of abundance and gastronomic delights. There is an alternative way of extracting meaning from the character *mei*, though. Some scholars believe that the *yang* (goat) character on the top half of the character *mei* refers to the feather head decoration used in ritual dances. For this reason, the notion of beauty was, they believe, originally inspired by the act of 'wearing feather head decoration (*toudai yumao*)' (Li 1992:236-237).

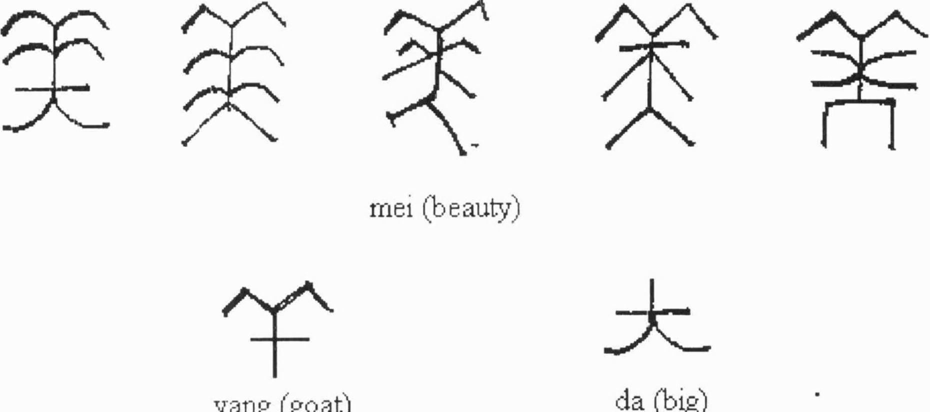


Fig. 2.2 The character *mei* (beauty) - various forms of oracle-bone script.

Despite differences in interpretation, there is a common rationale behind the urge to hunt for any potential illumination on a subject matter by going back to the roots of its written form. In doing so, one hopes to discover the evolutionary history of a concept and its relation to society in general. It is assumed that the archaic origin of a written character is equated with a kind of conceptual prototype, from where notions evolve in the course of time. Derived meanings of a character incubate and propagate around this conceptual centre of gravity. By retracing the path of character development, the prototypes of ideas and notions are expected to be excavated, offering scathing insights. This body of prototypical concepts constitutes one of the major sources of the deep knowledge in written characters *per se*.

The third approach to the deep knowledge of written characters is through 'doing' calligraphy. To move on the continuum from *xiezi* at one end towards calligraphy as a fine art (*shufa*) at the other end (chapter 1) is also to move towards the absolute knowledge of writing. One of the most important variables on the continuum from *xiezi* to *shufa* is the knowledge of calligraphic techniques. Knowledge of calligraphic techniques helps unravel the hidden messages carried within written characters, such as the interplay of structural balance and imbalance, and the meaning of the natural rhythm of things (chapters 4 and 5). The deep meaning of written characters can be discovered through their two-dimensional graphic forms, as well as the process of execution. Calligraphy may or may not be an art, but almost everybody in China writes. As a result, the technology of writing art is very widely distributed. Not everyone is an expert, yet everybody can say something about or comment on the aesthetic quality of a piece of writing to an extent.[32] Besides, most people think of their own writing as at least a little bit artistic, even though they may not admit it in public. In other words, almost everybody belongs to the category of people who knows something about calligraphy, but also to the category who cannot really write 'good' calligraphy. One often hears people publicly offer their evaluation of a piece of calligraphic work, while claiming that they do not know much about the subject. Everybody is placed

[32] Bourdieu argues that there exists a relationship between "the potlatch of time" and the accumulation of cultural capital, capital that cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy (Bourdieu 1984:281-282). This can be used to set a framework for the uneven distribution of calligraphic knowledge. The training of calligraphy, therefore the acquisition of calligraphic technology (chapter 7), requires what he calls a "potlatch of time", which only the leisured class can afford. This is also attested by the fact that practising calligraphy is sometimes considered a retiree's activity in contemporary China.

at some point of the continuum between total ignorance and absolute knowledge, but no one is at either end.

2.3.2 Extrapolating a Theological Version of Absolute Knowledge

I have paid more attention to the 'knowledgeable' end of the continuum. It may help to give some examples from the other extreme, i.e., the illiterate. Once I asked my key informant in Dali, an illiterate married woman in her late twenties with two children, whether people pasted *chunlian* (New Year couplets) at the entrance of houses in her village. She looked at me blankly and said, "What is *chunlian*?" After I explained to her, she exclaimed,

> "Ah! Yes, we do. We have them on our doors. Before the New Year, you go to the market to buy them. They are hung on a string in a long row, each one with different things written on it. If you see something you like, you buy them. If you can't find anything you like, you can just ask the person who sells them to write different ones for you. Those who write them are all very old. They are very *lihai* (amazingly capable)! They can use a brush to write many different characters. These characters used to be written in gold powder (*jinfen*) (mixed with glue). But nowadays they have all switched to copper powder (*tongfen*). It's cheaper."

I asked her whether people also wrote *chunlian* with black ink (*moshui*), once again, she looked at me blankly and said, "What is *moshui*?" I told her it was black, then she replied that no one wrote with *moshui*, which was obviously not true because I had seen many couplets in the village written in *moshui*. Apart from *moshui*, she also showed apparent ignorance about the term *shufa* during our conversation. Each time I used the term, she thought that I meant *shu* (books). Nevertheless, she did know that there was a special type of writing done with a brush. I asked her how she chose spring couplets if she could not read the characters written on them. She said that sometimes her husband, who could read characters (*shizi*), chose them. She told me, "I do not understand, but my husband does (*wo budong, danshi wode xiansheng dong*)."[33]

The point I want to extract from this example is this: At the 'total ignorance' end of the continuum, there are the illiterate who barely know anything about written characters or calligraphy, yet who still live in an environment where written characters have an ubiquitous presence. They also actively participate in everyday matters that involve written

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[33] Sometimes she asked the writer what the written couplets meant.

characters, such as choosing and pasting New Year couplets (Fig. 2.3). At the continuum's other end, it is assumed that some sort of unknowable 'theological' version of 'absolute knowledge' about written characters exists. One does not have to possess this 'theological' version of knowledge to believe in its existence. The reasoning is: If I do not know about such matters (*wo budong*), there are others who know about them (so-and-so *dong*). Those at the bottom end of the continuum, e.g., illiterate people, assume that there must be people who know/*dong* about these difficult characters. But, as one moves up the continuum, one realises that there is still too much about written characters not understood/*dong*. As a result, the continuum lengthens as one progresses along it. Nevertheless, one simply assumes that there are people who do understand/*dong*. What emerges from this picture is a strong sense of ascending the tower of absolute knowledge in written characters, yet never reaching the top. It is believed that there are layers of knowledge[34] stored in written characters. Some people are capable of unravelling it, while othersare not. However, those who can draw some insight from what is hidden within written characters cannot exhaust this body of knowledge. Different people extract knowledge from characters to different depths. There is always deeper knowledge to be extracted. It is a matter of unattainable final truth. The absolute knowledge on the continuum only exists by extrapolation.

In this chapter, I have tried to show, on the conceptual level, that the accumulation of *wenhua* - transformation by writing - is central to the process of becoming a Chinese person. On the practical level, however, the relationship between writing and personhood is best seen in the belief that handwriting reveals something about the state of the person.

[34] The notion of knowledge here belongs to the category of 'knowledge to be recovered', as opposed to 'knowledge to be discovered', as in the western scientific tradition (Parry 1989:205). Parry points out that [in the Brahmanical tradition,] knowledge progressively degenerates with time, and is therefore something to be recovered from the sages of the past, whose wisdom cannot be surpassed in the present (Parry 1989:220). There is a similar opacity regarding the retrieval of knowledge that is believed to be buried in Chinese characters.

3. Handwriting and Personhood

3.1 Fascinated with Handwriting

It is very common for people in China to make comments about the handwriting of others. For most Chinese, having neat and beautiful handwriting often attracts overt admiration. Whereas, a bad and ill-controlled one is silently disparaged. When learning to write, children are often taught to distinguish and appreciate good handwriting through verbal judgements from adults. Children with clear and neat writing receive appraisal like "S/He is going to be good academically" (*jianglai hui dushu*). In amorous contexts, good handwriting is often regarded as a strong asset to win a desired heart. In the early stages of courting, it is common for young men embarrassed by their handwriting to ask for help from a friend with elegant handwriting to write 'decently' presented love letters. The impact of handwriting cannot be overstated. While seeing beauty in a physical sense might trigger a defense mechanism - since the appearance can be deceptive[1] - the innocent beauty of handwriting can nevertheless grab hearts. Paradoxically, for some people, one's physical appearance is sometimes regarded as a less 'authentic' representation of the inner self than one's handwriting. There may well be a divergence between physical appearance and self. But when it comes to handwriting, such gulf is often thought to be significantly diminished on either the conscious or the subconscious level.

Fascination with handwriting can be found in every crevice of everyday life. I have met many people who spend hours practising 'writing (*xiezi*)'. By referring to writing, I do not mean writing sentences or paragraphs with an intention to express oneself. Rather, it is simply putting down on paper characters or phrases that pop into one's head without paying much attention to the content. Unlike expressing or communicating, it is writing with no interest invested beyond the characters as they appear on paper. Many literate Chinese do this occasionally. I have also observed that students, while reading in preparation for examinations, often have a pen at hand and notepad on the table, jotting down continuously whatever catchy terms they encounter while reading.

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[1] As a popular saying goes, "Beautiful roses generally have thorns (*meili de meigui you ci*)".

During an after-dinner chat with one of my host families in Kunming, the conversation focused on handwriting. It was triggered, not by a fieldworker's inquisitiveness, but by my notebook which lay invitingly on the table. Lan, the daughter of the family, commented that she liked my handwriting, so she urged me to write something on the blank notebook. "But what should I write?" I hesitated at the prospect of 'showing off' in front of them. She replied "Anything. How about your and our names?" So I started writing down her name. This marked the beginning of an one-hour 'handwriting comparison' session. Everyone took turns to write on the paper anything that came to mind, while commenting, admiring or teasing the effort of others. On another occasion, Lan's boyfriend arrived in the middle of a casual discussion on handwriting and related anecdotes. Lan's elder brother was also present. He immediately told me that Lan's boyfriend had very good handwriting (*zi xie de hao*). Lan then asked her boyfriend to write something on paper so that I could see his handwriting. After a minute's hesitation out of shyness, he succumbed to the pressure of his girlfriend. He took a fountain pen from his pocket and sat in front of a table. Subdued and focused on the blank notepad, he appeared to gather his thoughts. He then twirled the fountain pen with his fingers for a few seconds before the pen made contact with the paper. A minute later, a classic poem by the Tang dynasty poet Li Bo filled the sheet, with his signature at the bottom (Fig. 3.1). As soon as the poem was finished, Lan's brother exclaimed "*Hao, hao, xie de hao*! (Good, good, well written characters)". Strangely, the solemnity of the preparation and the excitement stirred up by the finished work was similar to that generated by a live performance of artistic excellence.[2]

Evidence of people's interest in handwriting is also found in bookshops. At many of Kunming's bookshops in Kunming, there are large numbers of books or manuals on either brush-calligraphy (*maobi shufa*) or fountain-pen calligraphy (*yingbi shufa. yingbi*, lit. hard-point pen, as opposed to soft calligraphic brush). In some shops, they are displayed on tables reserved for popular titles. In others, they occupy a special area in glass cabinets guarded by shop attendants. Items in glass cabinets enjoy a status equivalent to the small valuable pieces in an English antique shop, and therefore can only be viewed or browsed on demand. My curiosity concerns mainly the *yingbi shufa* manuals. They are written with the sole

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[2] I mention in the introduction that the act of writing with a brush in front of others is inevitably performative. Here it seems that writing with a fountain pen can be equally performative. The interesting thing is that he even signed after the Tang poem, as if to mark the fact that it was a piece of his work, in his handwriting.

objective of improving one's handwriting. Model writings are, without exception, the fountain-pen version of brush calligraphy. They retain the compositional forms valued in brush calligraphy, especially that of the cursive style (*caoshu*). These bookshops are often tiny, consisting in floor area of no larger than five square meters. One would expect that the conspicuously displayed items must be bestsellers. And indeed they are.

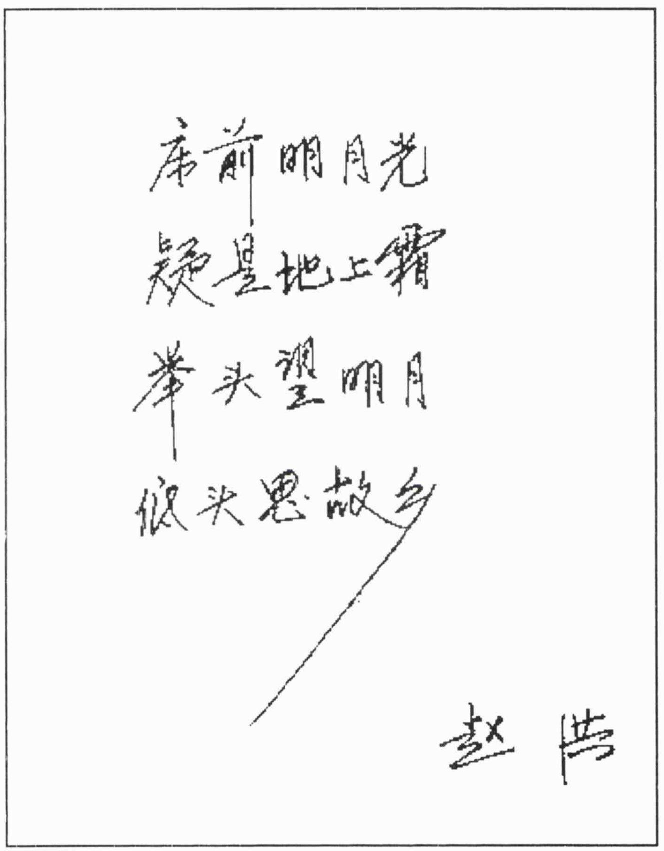

Fig. 3.1 A handwritten poem by Lan's boyfriend.

3.1.1 Pleasing Everyone: Practising Handwriting as a Form of Work in the Office

According to Lan, a government magazine editor in her early twenties, these are "practical books, unlike fiction." She often talked about how to kill time in the office. The two safest ways (i.e., ones that are least likely to attract criticism from co-workers) are to practice fountain-pen calligraphy and to read newspapers. As an office worker in a government work unit (*danwei*), she had to arrive at the office by eight o'clock and leave at five with a lunch-cum-snooze break from eleven-thirty to two-thirty every weekday. Because her provincial magazine was government-funded, there was no need to worry about sales targets. She claimed there was only ten minute's worth of work each day, which was why she had to find ways to kill time and fend off boredom. Since her main job was to sort

readers' letters, writing envelopes was a common task. She once told me, "You can't just sit there doing nothing after you finish writing envelopes. That way, you'll give your *lingdao* [leading cadre, a boss who has a tremendous influence on one's personal life through his power over many important decisions] a bad impression. And that will have a negative impact on your accommodation allocation prospect (*fenfang*)." So what do people normally do apart from reading newspaper[3]? She told me,

> "When you have to do paperwork, you write as slowly as possible. By doing so, you are able to extend a ten-minute task to twenty or thirty, or even longer. And most important of all, you can make other people think you are working hard because you are always writing. That's why fountain-pen calligraphy books are popular here. Practising fountain-pen calligraphy is a good thing to do in the office. It pleases everyone. It pleases your *lingdao*, as well as improving your handwriting at the same time."

To practise written characters or handwriting (*lianzi*), conveniently marries office practicality with the interests of self-improvement. *Ba zi xie hao*, to write characters well, simultaneously offers a relatively criticism-free, therefore anxiety-free, zone in the midst of potentially tumultuous office politics, as well as a domain for a self-indulgent personal pursuit. Furthermore, as Lan pointed out, another reason why people *lianzi* in the office is because it makes them look busy. The act of writing is considered a form of work for most people. This is particularly true for students. If a student does not sit quietly in front of a desk and write, s/he is likely to be told off by the parents. "You don't study while you should. Instead, you run around without any justifiable purpose (*dushu bu dushu, daochu luanpao*)," they will say. One sure way to convince people that you are 'really studying or working' is to write. As for what one actually writes, it does not matter. To write is to 'be civilised (*you wenhua*)', as I pointed out in the previous chapter, even if the content of your writing is absolute rubbish. Somehow, the aura of calligraphy brushes off on you even when you use it in a totally non-productive way. But is it also possible that people lavish time on *lianzi* because it is a recognised art form?

3.1.2 Fountain-Pen Shufa as an Emerging Art Form

During my stay in Kunming, articles promoting *yingbi shufa* as a new twentieth

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[3] She said that reading newspapers was considered a good thing to do in the office by her *lingdao* because it showed that one was concerned with national affairs (*guanxin guojia dashi*).

century art form frequently appeared in newspapers.[4] A few organized national competitions of *yingbi shufa* have been held. In some cities, *yingbi shufa* associations have been formed and television education programs on *yingbi shufa* appear daily on Central Television Channels (Pang 1985:62-3). Among writers on *yingbi shufa* [namely those who produce model works for *yingbi shufa*], Pang Zhonghua is one of the most famous and his manuals are the most widely used by Kunming people. During the Cultural Revolution, he spent most of his time in routine gatherings and meetings (*zao qingshi, wan huibao*, asking for instructions in the morning and submitting reports in the evening), crouching in an inconspicuous corner, practising *yingbi shufa* on scraps of paper (Pang 1980). *Yingbi shufa* is normally treated as an extension of brush calligraphy (*maobi shufa*). Aesthetic criteria of *maobi shufa* are grafted onto "the art of fountain-pen writing", leaving out the aspects generated only by the supple and resilient brush. In spite of my conscious effort, I failed to notice anything being said about *yingbi shufa* that could not just as well apply to *maobi shufa*. Here are a couple of examples of the direct grafting from *maobi* to *yingbi shufa*, in both technical and aesthetic terms, found in Pang's manuals (1980). Firstly, the basic strokes of *yingbi shufa* attempt to recreate the standard bush techniques with a tool of very different structure and characteristics (ibid.:69). For example, *dunbi*, a technique that involves pause in preparation for the change in the direction of movement, is unquestionably an imitation of an established brush technique. Technically, the *dunbi* technique serves a very different role in fountain pen writing since the hiding of the brush tip is no longer a concern (see chapter 4), as it is when writing with an extremely supple and resilient brush. In *yingbi shufa*, *dunbi* is purely an attempt to copy the graphic form produced by a brush. Similarly, *huibi*, the reverse and upward movement of the tip of the pen at the end of a downward vertical stroke is another attempt to recreate the brush movement in *maobi shufa* (see chapter 4 for more discussion on brush techniques). As a comparison, it is worth mentioning that, in Taiwan, school children are often clearly instructed to employ the *dunbi* technique in their pencil- or fountain-pen-writing. One often hears adults commenting on this particular aspect of children's handwriting - *dunbi*. "So-and-so writes characters with *dunbi*, so his/her characters are well written (So-and-so *xiezi you dunbi, suoyi zi xiede hao*)." Secondly, *lintie* (free copying of model works) is still considered the most important way to learn *yingbi*

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[4] Especially in *Chuncheng Wanbao* (Chuncheng Evening Paper), the most widely read evening paper in Kunming. According to Lan, it is the paper she reads if she wants to know what is happening in the city. It is her source of information about Kunming outside the immediate reach of her life. It is, on this account, a paper with the power to shape the city dwellers' perception of city life.

shufa (ibid.67).[5] Pang urged people to use *maobi shufa* classics as model works for *yingbi shufa* because not many *yingbi* model works were available at the time when his book was written. Examples of Pang's own copying of *maobi shufa* classics written with a fountain pen are shown in Fig. 3.2.

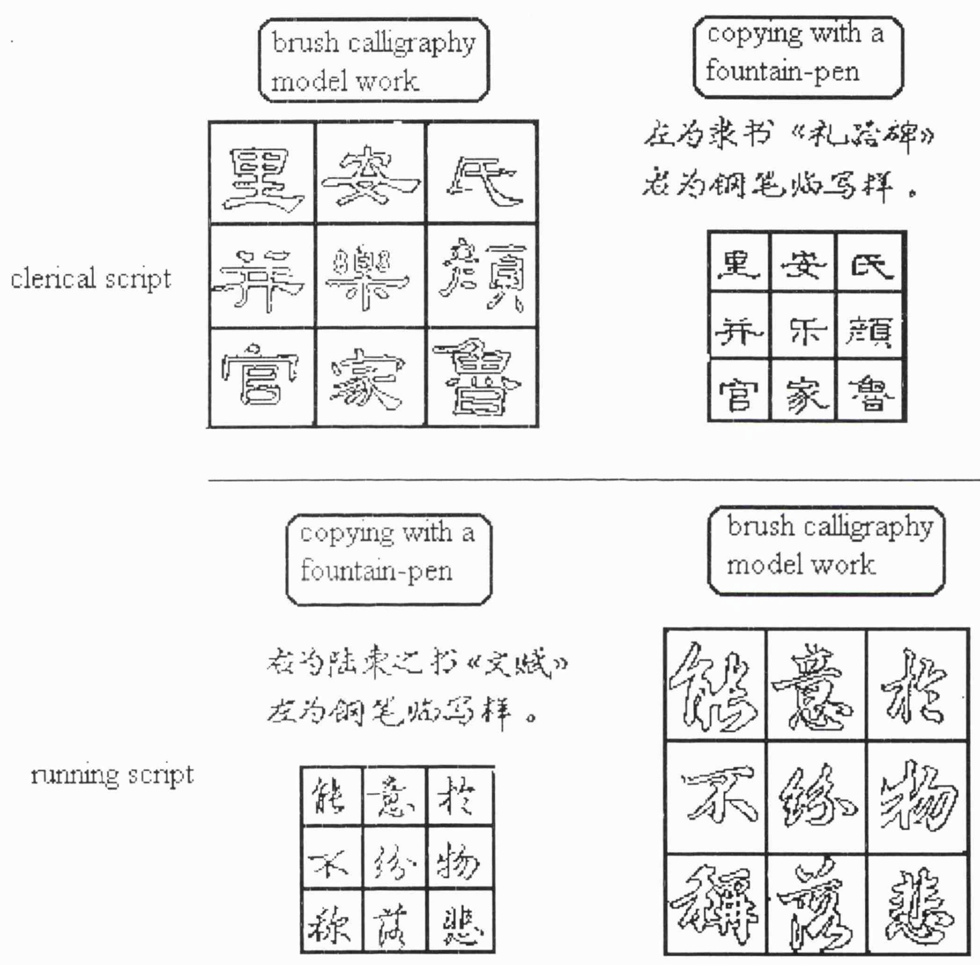

Fig. 3.2 Pang Zhonghua's fountain model writing.

There is a striking similarity between *yingbi shufa* and *maobi shufa*, with respect to aesthetic and technical criteria. In other words, *yingbi shufa*, though promoted as an emerging art form, has not yet formed a set of aesthetic evaluations and requirements of its own. It simply grafts and emulates the established artistic tradition of brush calligraphy. I would argue that practising fountain-pen calligraphy amounts to nothing more than practising handwriting with a modern writing instrument. It is also possible that people are

[5] For a detailed account of the learning procedures of brush calligraphy, refer to chapter 5.

interested in the idea of *yingbi zi*, because it is a way of doing *shufa* without having to fuss with a brush (*maobi*). They like the books on *yingbi shufa* not because they introduce a new theory of writing, but because they elevate people's everyday writing (with *yingbi*) to art status.

3.1.3 Practising Brush Calligraphy by Writing Big-Character Posters

Writing big-character posters (*dazibao*) also played a significant role in boosting the national calligraphic standard and popularizing brush writing (cf. Zheng 1994:198, mentioned in Bayne 1998:165). Though used by twentieth-century movements before Communist rule, the use of big-character posters did not acquire its full momentum until the "Hundred Flowers Movement (*baihua qifang*)" in 1957. At first, people were merely 'encouraged' to write *dazibao*. Later, this was replaced by a mechanically quantitative approach. People were sometimes told by Party officials to hand in a certain number of *dazibao* before a certain deadline (Leijonhufvud 1990:56). At the height of the Hundred Flowers Movement, "posters were so numerous in the government agencies that smoking had to be prohibited because of the fire risk with so much paper around. Walls, windows, staircases, office rooms and corridors were all full of them, sometimes hung on lines stretched from one wall to another" (ibid.:55).[6] *Dazibao* was used even more frenetically as a medium of mass mobilization during the Cultural Revolution. "Sometimes there was a competition as to which group would produce the most *dazibao*. There were reports of people staying up all night and skipping their meals in order to write as many as possible. When they were covered by new posters as soon as they had been put up, the idea seems to have been to make a show of force, rather than actually to be read" (ibid.:67).

At first, *dazibao* was mainly used by students or intellectuals to spread critical messages against Party cadres, or their policies. Later it spread to a broader spectrum of people and was adopted by workers, peasants and children (Fig. 3.3). Even the illiterate were expected to ask others to write for them. A woman in her fifties, who used to work for the Kunming Public Transport Bureau (*keyun ju*), told me her experience of *dazibao* during the Cultural Revolution. She had to write as many sheets as she could everyday, despite disliking it, for fear of attracting criticism from her colleagues. Some people,

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[6] For a thorough documentation and discussion on the history and examples of big-character posters, see Leijonhufvud 1990.

however, gladly reflected that being forced to write *dazibao* everyday had inadvertently improved their calligraphic skills. An active practising calligrapher in Kunming told me his story:

> "The second period of time in my life when I practised calligraphy intensively was during the Great Leap Forward (*da yuejin*) period. Before then, the Principal of my school kept telling me that my *zi* was horrible (*tai zaogao*). Whenever he saw me - in the classroom, toilet, playground and in the canteen - he would say that to me. One day, I couldn't take it any more, so I said to him, "Why don't you teach me to write calligraphy then (*jiaowo xiezi*)? He replied, "I was waiting for you to ask." So he started teaching me. Gradually, my *zi* improved. Later, the Great Leap Forward Movement started. Each student - boy or girl - was obliged to push carts of heavy things like bricks for a few kilometres twice a day everyday, to move them around. One day, they needed people to write the poster for the celebration of the National Day. The Principal asked me to take up the task. I accepted it happily because that way I didn't have to carry on with the laborious jobs. However, I couldn't find a proper calligraphic brush, and I couldn't ask for one either in case they were hassled and decided to find someone else. So I improvised an ordinary flat brush to write with. I was rather pleased with the characters I wrote for the poster and showed them to the Principal. He hung them up on the wall to scrutinise it, because one cannot judge the quality of brush technique (*yongbi*) and calligraphic composition (*jianjia jiegou*) when calligraphy is placed on a horizontal surface. He said to me, "Your *zi* is pretty good." So he decided to make me write posters everyday. I was extremely pleased because it meant that I didn't have to push heavy loads any more. As a result, I started to write calligraphy everyday. Without that experience, I probably would never have become a calligrapher."

Fig. 3.3 Writing big-character posters (*dazibao*).

3.1.4 Fascination Examined

The Chinese term *lian zi*, which literally means to practise handwriting, is among the most telling evidences of the extraordinary attention given to handwriting. The term is composed of two characters *lian* and *zi*. *Zi*, as mentioned earlier, means written characters. Besides, what I have been calling 'handwriting' is, in Chinese, simply termed *zi*. Somebody's handwriting is thus phrased as 'somebody's *zi*', i.e., somebody's written characters.[7] The more interesting character is *lian*, a verb, translated as 'to practise' so far. *Lian* means to do something repetitively. Unlike the verb *xie* (to write) which is often used together with *zi*, *lian* denotes a clear intention for improvement. *Lian* is also used in many training-related expressions, such as *lian qigong* (practising *qigong*), *lian qin* (practising piano) and *lian qiu* (practising ball game). The term *lian zi* itself does not imply any specific type of writing instrument. When someone says that he *lian zi*, it normally means that he practises writing

[7] Because *zi* can either mean written characters or handwriting, I shall carry on using 'handwriting' in situations where it is appropriate to avoid confusion.

with a brush. But sometimes, he may mean writing with a fountain pen. The implication is that 'to write written characters' is a practice that deserves to be *lian*-ed.

What emerges from these examples can be sorted into two slots. First, many Chinese pay a lot of attention to handwriting and related details. Second, some people even practise handwriting diligently - *lian zi* - and treat it as daily homework.[8] Unlike practising piano (*lian qin*, or *lian gangqin*), the intention of which is immediately apparent, to practise handwriting seems somewhat peculiar. Why does producing good handwriting matter? Handwriting, I propose, for the Chinese people, is like a secondary face, the layer of oneself that comes directly into contact with the world. By secondary, I mean that it is not as prominent as the physical face, which we actually carry around wherever we go and which is visible to everybody unless it is deliberately concealed. In contrast, this secondary face (handwriting) only reveals itself to the viewer when writing is involved. The question of why handwriting is a secondary face is what I will address next.

3.2 Handwriting and Personhood

> *"Writing is the painting of the heart. As soon as it takes form, it shows whether the writer is an upright man or a low-born fellow."*
> (Yang Xiong (53 BC- AD18), quoted in Billeter 1990: 237)

In imperial China, (brush) handwriting was regarded as an extension and reflection of one's character and moral quality - the "Confucian graphology" in Kraus's words (Kraus 1991:48-51; Rawson 1992:94; Billeter 1990). This is reflected in the careful choice of model calligraphic work in the process of learning calligraphy. My calligrapher informant Yao once told me:

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[8] There are, inevitably, counter-examples of this fascination with calligraphy or handwriting. There are people who cannot be bothered with all this fuss about good handwriting, or are even opposed to spending too much time on practising calligraphy or handwriting. In his *Yanshi Jiaxun* (Instructions to the Yan Family), the sixth-century scholar official Yan Zhitui warned his sons of the dangers of practising calligraphy or painting in case they are treated as 'handymen' on call by their superiors (Cahill 1994:124). Nevertheless, counter-examples such as this do not render the general proposition invalid, even though they do contribute to the rich texture of any social phenomena.

> "Whether people like your *zi* has a lot to do with your *renpin* (character, moral standing), or how people think of your *renpin*. For instance, both Yue Fei and Qin Kuai[9] were very good calligraphers. Yue's *zi* is virile and powerful (*xiongzhuang*). But Qin's *zi* is excellent too, perhaps even better than Yue's in terms of the brushwork. When Yue was young, he and his mother had to live in another's house as dependents (*jiren lixia*) because they were very poor. His calligraphy is good in balance (*xietiao*) but poor in *bifa* (brush techniques). But many people learn Yue's writing[10] (*xue Yue Fei de zi*), whereas nobody learns Qin's. The reason is that Qin has always been regarded as a *jianchen* (treacherous court official), so his *zi* is seen as not upright (*buzheng*); whereas Yue was a *zhongchen* (loyal court official), so his *zi* is without blemish. Cai Xiang (Cai Jing) is another good example. He was one of the greatest calligraphers during the Song Dynasty. But because he was also a *jianchen*[11], nobody liked to learn his *zi*. Therefore the calligraphy community decided to use his *xiaozi* (name used in childhood) *"xiang"* to replace his name *"jing"*, which is very rarely done. Gradually his *zi* also became accepted by the average people. In other words, if your *renpin* is good and you also have high social status, then your *zi* will be revered."[12]

His words highlight two major issues. One is the putative link between the calligrapher and his calligraphy, i.e., one's calligraphy is thought to reflect one's *renpin* (character, moral standing). Or put more precisely, one's calligraphy is thought to be inextricably linked to how people perceive your *renpin* to be. The second point is linked to the process of learning from a piece of model calligraphic work. As I will show in the following chapters, the learning process (modelling on master work) is understood as a gradual process of acquiring

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[9] Yue Fei (1103-1141) has always been regarded as a national hero; whereas Qin Kuai is labelled a national traitor. In the twelfth century when the Song dynasty was seriously threatened by Nüzhen people on it s northern border, Yue Fei's disciplined troops managed to defeat the enemy. As a result, he was revered as a hero who saved the Song dynasty. Just before an important battle between Yue's troop with the enemy, the emperor Zhao Gou ordered him to retreat and sought a truce with Nüzhen, fearing Yue's popular support might become a threat to his position as emperor. He instructed Qin Kuai to incriminate Yue Fei falsely of treason, then kill him. Ever since, Qin has been held responsible for Yue's tragic death. Later, four kneeling iron statues of Qin and his wife, etc., were erected in front of Yue's grave in Xihu, Hangzhou. It is said that visitors to the burial site regularly urinate on, spit on and hit the statues. As a result, they often have to be rebuilt (Bo 1984:647-675).

[10] To learn someone's *zi* means to take his *zi* as model work. For a full treatment on the role of copying master's *zi* in the learning process, see chapter 5.

[11] When Cai Jing was the *zaixiang* [equivalent to prime minister in the imperial China] of the Song dynasty, he was said to have fawned shamelessly on the emperor Zhao Jie and corrupted him into exorbitant extravagance (Bo 1984:648). There may be a piece of false information given by my informant here. He may have confused Cai Xiang with Cai Jing (see chapter 4, footnote 14). But even if he is wrong, the fact that Cai Jing fell from grace and favour in the eyes of later calligraphers as a result of his bad reputation remains true.

[12] Ouyang Xiu held a similar viewpoint: "All ancient people (*guren*) could write calligraphy, but only the works of those of virtue pass on to later generations" (Ouyang Xiu, *Ouyang wenzhong ji*, in Ji 1988:556).

both technical and moral qualities of the model calligrapher. Treacherous court officials (*jianchen*) obviously have seriously defected moral qualities. As a result, their calligraphy is also undesirable as model work in spite of its technical excellence. These two issues combine to explain why works by calligraphers with poor moral reputations, mostly relating to loyalty to the nation or to the Chinese people (*zhong*), are shunned by those who wish to learn calligraphy.

The link between a person and his/her handwriting is not entertained by the Chinese alone. The diagnosis of spirit/personality from handwriting is exalted to the status of 'science' in the West and called graphology. "Graphologists claim to discern something of the internal engine, the permanent rhythm of the body, in the handwriting of the adult and they are very likely right, for it is only through this integration that fluency in writing can be achieved" (Gombrich 1984:13-4). The individual biological rhythm is supposed to be reflected in the consistently recurrent graphic forms of one's handwriting. Through slight individual deviations from the traditional lettering, Euro-American graphologists seek indications of a coherent system of character traits.

Euro-American graphologists claim that "the significance of handwriting as characteristic of an individual personality is based on the general principle that every bodily movement is at the same time a movement expressing the mind" (Jacoby 1948:38). Gombrich puts his argument elegantly without juggling with the relationship between mind and bodily movement. In discussing order and movement in decorative arts, he assigns great importance to the "natural organic movement", which is seen to establish the personal style of artists (Gombrich 1984:14). What he means by the "natural organic movement" is the built-in motorial dispositions or patterns of movement that everyone, even a chimpanzee (Schiller 1951), is invested with. For him, it is this "internal engine of organic rhythms" that generates unique handwriting. For Western graphologists, what Gombrich coined as "natural organic movement" can find its source in the mind. According to this interpretation, handwriting is a result of a natural flow from inside a person, through the loyal body, which is unmediated by concealing calculation. Handwriting is thought to be the product of unreflected bodily rhythm and dispositions, free from the contamination of deliberation, and therefore the most authentic revelation of the person's character. Graphologists, such as Jacoby, took this conviction as the fundamental principle of his science.

> "The true judge of human nature will observe the seemingly unimportant and inconspicuous traits of character which - forming a neutral zone - escape the attention of dissembling persons, for it is in these traits, and not in the consciously intended behaviour, that the person's true nature is revealed... Such a neutral zone is represented by handwriting, recording the lines of character better than a photographic plate. The ego of the writer finds itself in a sphere beyond its control, even if the writer were to succeed in concentrating his attention on it for a short time... The neutral sphere of handwriting helps him to avoid the danger of being deceived by consciously assumed behaviour" (Jacoby 1948:41).

In other words, in the tradition of the Euro-American graphology, the relationship between handwriting and personality is firmly hinged on the idea of a mindless body that nevertheless reveals the secrets of the mind.[13] By inference, the fundamental premises of Euro-American graphology are threefold. Firstly, bodily movements are assumed to be controlled by the mind. Secondly, the mind controls bodily movements by two means, consciously and unconsciously. Conscious control results in deliberation and pretension; whereas unconscious control reveals the true mind, i.e., the core of personality. And finally, handwriting belongs to the second category of bodily movements. Since handwriting is the product of a sequence of bodily movement unconsciously controlled by the mind, it is thus an authentic reflection of the mind. In other words, it accurately reveals one's personality. Accordingly, various versions of the perfect translations from the language of handwriting to that of the mind or personality were established.

In this graphological interpretation, the role of the body is undoubtably prominent in authentically passing the messages and content of the mind to handwriting. The body is treated as a temporary passage, nothing more than a conduit between the mind and the surface of paper. This contrasts with the role of the body in Chinese understanding of the handwriting-person link - a point that will be discussed further soon. The Chinese believe that the person and the handwriting are mutually generative:

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[13] Recently, anthropologists have been advocating the idea of a "mindful body" to break the dichotomy between mind and body (Csordas 1990; Scheper-Hughes 1994; Strathern 1996).

Handwriting → Person
ren ru qi zi: The person resembles one's handwriting.
Handwriting ← Person
zi ru qi ren: The handwriting resembles one's person.

While Euro-American graphologists base individual handwriting differences on specific parameters such as pressure, connection, size and spacing,[14] the Chinese look for the general impressions evoked by handwriting. Instead, the appreciation of calligraphy has always been tightly intertwined with the notion and evaluation of *renpin*.

The term *renpin* is composed of two characters *ren*, meaning person or human, and *pin*, meaning class, grade or quality. Therefore, *renpin* can be understood as the quality of a person or the grade of someone as a person. As one term, *renpin* is normally translated into English as 'moral standing or character'. "If one's *pin* is high, then every dot and stroke he writes is teemed with an air of purity (*qing*), unbending will (*gang*), elegance (*ya*) and uprightness (*zheng*). If one's *pin* is low, even when his work looks impressive with deceptive vigour and strength, his untamed and flamboyant violence can nevertheless be detected" (Zhu Hegeng, *Linchi xinjie*, in Ji 1988:566). In other words, there is a canonised idea that the *pin* of one's calligraphy reflects faithfully the *pin* of the person. Most calligraphy theorists in imperial time held that visually attractive works did not necessarily possess superior qualities such as uprightness (*zheng*), nobility and sublimity (*gao*). Some even believed that these valued qualities came solely from the *pin* of the calligrapher. Nothing else, neither diligent practice nor acute sensibility to visual forms, could impregnate the work with such qualities. By implication, the beauty of forms and accomplishment in brush techniques are secondary to the *pin*, the grade and quality, of a piece of calligraphic work.

What follows is that a person with low *renpin*, therefore low moral standing, will not be able to produce genuinely superior calligraphic work. For example, Zhao Mengfu[15] once wrote "Wang Xizhi's *renpin* is very lofty (*gao*), therefore his calligraphy can be classified as the work of *shen* (*shenpin*, miraculous work, the highest grade in calligraphic assessment). There are those slaves and small people (*nuli xiaofu*), or even callow brats (*ruchou zhi zi*, lit. children who still stink of milk), who learn to write in the morning and

[14] The variables include pressure, regularity, connection, size, width, fullness, extension upwards and downwards, the speed of movement, spacing, and slanting angles, etc. (Jacoby 1948).

[15] For more information on Zhao Mengfu, see chapters 4 and 5.

already brag about their calligraphic capability in the evening. These people are shallow, vulgar and despicable. Despicable!" (in Ji 1988:561) Therefore, the only path to good calligraphy is to work on one's quality and standard as a person - *renpin*. This is born out by what I was told by a retired government magazine editor in his mid-sixties who had been practising calligraphy diligently for many years, "From one's *zi*, you can tell one's *xiuyang jingjie* (the state and achievement of ethical-moral pursuit). That is to say, to write good *zi*, there is also the endeavour outside characters themselves (*ziwai gongfu*)." As Fu Shan[16] succinctly put it, "To write characters, one must work on being a person first (*zuozi xian zuoren*)". What is most important about learning calligraphy is to establish upright and virtuous character (*lipin*) (Zhu Hegeng, *Linchi xinjie*, in Ji 1988:566).

The perceived link between calligraphy/handwriting and character is not just about moral quality. It is also about personal temperament (*xingqing*), although the notion of temperament is rarely devoid of moral judgement. An example can be found in Zhou Xinlian's assessment of the calligraphy/handwriting of some of the most celebrated calligraphers in Chinese history.

> "I think, through inked strokes, it is easy to detect the painter's personal qualities. The same principle can be applied to calligraphy (*zi*). Wang Xizhi and Yu Shinan's *zi* have a carefree and delicately fragrant appearance; with serenity and utmost ease. The flourishing atmosphere of their *zi* is reminiscent of the vitality of Spring and Summer, which is called the *xiqi* (joyous quality)... Zhu Suiliang, Yan Zhenqing and Liu Gongquan's characters are of supreme standing in history. These three persons have an unfaltering loyalty that is strong enough to pierce through the sun and the moon. As a result, their *zi* also emits an austere air of solemnity and justness... Li Bo's *zi* is fresh and lively with a breath of purity. His *zi* is so unsullied by the dust of the mundane world that they have an ethereal air of a fairy (*xian*). Su Dongpo's brush carries wind and waves. His *zi* is innocent and carefree, totally uncontaminated by affectation; whereas Mi Fu's writing is like dragon leaping through the heaven's gate and tiger lying in the phoenix palace. The *zi* of these two persons were unequalled in their time, and both possess the quality of undaunted chivalry. Huang Tingjian's *zi* is lean and sprightly, graceful and exquisite without equals. It is also profound and possesses a noble and aristocratic air. All these are examples of the *zi* resembling the person, and naturally revealing his inner qualities." (Zhou

[16] For information on Fu Shan, see chapter 5:26-27.

Xinlian, *Linchi guanjian*. In Ji 1988:566-67)[17]

Although ideas about handwriting have undergone inevitable changes throughout history, the widely adopted conviction that handwriting reflects something about the person has remained, by and large, stable. In present-day China, the implied revelation through one's *zi* is mostly about personal qualities relatively detached from moral judgement, such as the physical appearance and character traits. Many people I spoke to in Kunming agreed that one could tell the sex of the writer from handwriting with a very high degree of accuracy. Some believed that people with pretty handwriting were very likely to be good-looking as well. Some were convinced that good handwriting was a reliable indication of one's patience and *wenzhong* (psychological and behavioural stability and composure), because they must have practised *xiezi* diligently when young. Most people claimed to show an instinctive respect for those with good handwriting. No matter what accounted for their good handwriting, it had to be admirable. Some even admitted that they tended to behave differently to people with beautiful or ugly handwriting, at least when they were not sufficiently familiar with the writer. One woman in her late twenties, assured me emphatically that she could unerringly diagnose the dominant traits of a person from his/her handwriting. For example, she told me that people with big handwriting tended to be more tolerant, and those with small handwriting were more likely to be fastidious about details. I asked my informant, the one who worked for a jewellery company, whether he thought he could see something about the person by looking at his handwriting alone. He said,

> "By looking at someone's handwriting, you should be able to know his personality, however it's not absolutely true. Besides, you can also tell one's *wenhua shuiping* (*wenhua* level) by looking at one's *zi*. If you write fluently (*zi xie de shulian*), it means that your *wenhua shuiping* is high because you must have written a lot (*zi xie de duo*). If you write stroke by stroke (*jiu zi dou zi*, *dou* is Kunming dialect, means to *cou*, to gather together), it shows that your *wenhua shuiping* is low. Besides, if your handwriting is small, it means that you are more cautious and reserved (*jüjin*). On the contrary, if your handwriting is big (*zida*), it shows that you are more outgoing and

[17] The descriptions he gave here are generally in accord with the general impression Chinese people have of these historical figures, if they are known at all. For example, Huang Tingjian (1045-1105) came from an aristocratic family. He was known to have had access to the original of Huai Su's *Autobiography*, a piece of highly treasured calligraphy in wild cursive script dated 777 A.D. Huang's aristocratic upbringing also provided him with rare opportunities to study the originals of a wide range of earlier calligraphic treasures in original pieces, in rubbing, and in the form of stone inscriptions (Clunas 1997:144). Yan Zhenqing has been an exemplar of loyalty in Chinese history (chapter 5:26-28). Li Bo's popular image is that of a free spirit who drank voraciously and composed poems unparalleled by their freshness.

sanguine (*kailang*)."

He suggests that handwriting provides information about the personality of the writer, for example, whether one is an extravert or an introvert. Although he admitted that the information could be misleading, he nevertheless believed that the fluency or proficiency of handwriting (*shulia*) was a very reliable indication of one's *wenhua shuiping*. To demonstrate what he meant, he picked up a postcard on the coffee table sent to his father and told me,

> "The person definitely hasn't practised writing before (*keneng mei lian guo zi*).[18] His *zi* is not very well written (*zi xiede bu tai hao*). But it's fluently written (*shulian*). This can be judged from the structure, technique of writing and the orientation of the *zi* (*zouxiang*). [He showed me an envelop written by his aunt as a contrast.] Look, this handwriting is good (*zhege zi hao*). It's fluently written and coherent (*lianguan*). Beside, the structure is balanced... When I look at handwriting (*shouti zi*), I would instinctively think whether this *zi* is good (*hao*) or not (*buhao*). People with good *zi* tend to have higher *wenhua shuiping*. Those with not so good *zi* are very likely to have low *wenhua shuiping*."

Interestingly, he had the idea that one's *wenhua* shuiping was reflected in one's handwriting. In other words, good handwriting is believed to come in the package of achieving sophistication through the acquisition of *wen*. Therefore, *dushu* (reading, studying) is good for one's handwriting (chapter 2). Moreover, for him, whether or not handwriting is good depends on the structure, techniques of writing and the orientation of characters, which are exactly the criteria of brush calligraphy. This is very likely to be a result of his interest in brush calligraphy. For someone who knows little about brush calligraphy, such as his younger sister, these technical elements are rarely stressed. She once told me, "I can never tell whether someone's *zi* is good (*hao*). All I know is whether someone's *zi* is good to look at (*haokan*). If I am told by others that it is good, then I believe it is good." For people who are more familiar with the tradition and discourse of brush calligraphy, it is natural to employ the established criteria of brush calligraphy for the assessment of writing with modern tools. For those who are not, *haokan* or not is how they assess someone's handwriting.[19] However, I am not certain to what extent these judgements are influenced by the aesthetic criteria of traditional brush calligraphy, which constitutes a

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[18] This does not mean that he has not written before, but that he has not practised on writing with the intention to perfect it.

[19] One can also argue that these two forms of appreciation are located on different points on the continuum from complete ignorance to absolute knowledge discussed in chapter 2.

stock of implicit knowledge received as part of the growing-up experience.

Judging from the examples I have mentioned, there is undoubtedly a diluted moralistic overtone, and a certain degree of facile playfulness has been introduced to the social significance of handwriting. Nevertheless, the handwriting-person bond is certainly not obsolete. Handwriting, in the eyes of contemporary Kunming Chinese, is thought to indicate personality traits, the standard of *wenhua*, or the physical appearance of the writer. In some cases, the criteria of traditional brush calligraphy is resorted to for the assessment of handwriting with modern writing tools. In other cases, it is not articulated in the jargon of brush calligraphy. One can nevertheless safely draw the conclusion that the Chinese, ancient or contemporary, tend to read something about the person from his/her handwriting.

3.2.1 Handwriting as a Secondary Face

In a casual context, I was struck by the fact that the nephew of Lan, an elementary school (*xiaoxue*) boy, had all his textbooks wrapped up in plain white paper for protection. On the paper, his name was written by his mother with a fountain pen. I mentioned this to Lan. She told me it was a common thing to do. She showed me her old textbooks used in high school. The same thing had been done to them years ago. But in her case, her name was written in her brother's elegant and cursive handwriting with a fountain pen. I was told that he had always been considered to have a good handwriting within his social circle. He told me proudly that he was once asked by his friends to write the sign board of their newly opened restaurant in the cursive-style brush calligraphy. After years of burying himself in copying model works, his reputation was hard earned. To ask someone with good handwriting to write your name on your books, apparently, has something to do with marking the ownership. But even more apparent is that the marking of ownership is not the only thing at issue. Otherwise, anyone can write on it and the most logical person to do so is oneself! So what is at issue then?

Lan's elder brother once told me that young people often asked a friend who was considered to have good handwriting to write love letters for them, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In fact, he did this three times for his friends when he was in junior high school. He said,

> "They felt that their handwriting was not good enough (*zi xie de bugouhao*). And they were right. When I was in junior high school, my handwriting was like *xingcao* (a style verging between the running style and the cursive style), so it could pass as adult handwriting.[20] Therefore, I often wrote sickness notices(*jiatiao*), and signatures (*qianzi*) for my classmates.[21] I did this for over half of my classmates. If my classmates thought their writing was bad, we would think about what to write together and then I would write it for them to fool our teachers."

I then asked him why people want their love letters written in good handwriting? He replied:

> "If the handwriting is good, then the love letter is endowed with a certain charm (*Zi hao, qingshu caiyou meili*). If your handwriting is no good (*zi buhao*), it is very likely to undermine the aim of the pursuit. It is very obvious really. When you see the letter, you tend to associate the letter with the person. For example, there is a joke going around like this. Someone is pursuing a girl. The girl asks him to send her a photo of himself, so he sends her a photo of Liu Dehua [a very good-looking Hong Kong actor-cum-singer, a super star idolised by many youngsters]. Later she returned him with a photo of Brook Shields [pretending it was her]. It's the same thing. If your love letter is written in bad handwriting, the image (*xingxiang*) will be bad. When you see the *zi*, you'll associate (*lianxiang*) it with the person's appearance, even though one's writing often doesn't match one's look. If your *zi* is no good, then you'll be *da zhekou* (sold at a discounted price) as well."

It is as though the handwriting stands for the pursuer's face, and an attractive face naturally stands a better chance of success, despite the risk of being accused of cheating later. Just as one puts makeup on the face, or even undertakes facial surgery, for a more appealing look, it seems only logical that some Chinese should devote such attention to perfecting their handwriting. In the nexus of image projecting and reflecting in the social world, handwriting is equivalent to a secondary face, seen by oneself and others.[22] I suggest

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[20] There is an unwritten rule, in popular conception, that different styles of calligraphy/handwriting are associated with different stage of maturity. On the one end, the regular style (*kaishu*), in which each stroke is written in a regular fashion, is normally seen as the childhood stage of calligraphy/handwriting. On the other end, cursive style (*caoshu*), in which a multitude of strokes are often linked and reduced to one or two simple but elegant strokes, is seen as the fully mature stage. Running style (*xingshu*) lies somewhere in the middle. As a consequence, an adult with extremely tidy and regular (stroke by stroke) handwriting is often seen as stagnated in his/her development in terms of handwriting. However, this popular conception is not found in the artistic realm of brush calligraphy.

[21] Homework often needs a parent's signature on it to prove that they have checked it.

[22] George Herbert Mead (1934) proposed that self is not initially there at birth but "arises in the process of social experience and activities, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (Mead 1934:135). For him and those inspired by his ideas (cf. Novaes 1997), the self-concept evolves from social interactions and will undergo many changes over the course of a lifetime. In the stream of social interactions, our understanding of

that to have your name written on your textbook covers by someone with good handwriting can be explained by this interpretation of handwriting as a secondary face. Textbook covers are an important façade for school children because they have to spend hours everyday handling them and they are on view to contemporaries.[23] If someone is not confident with the face they are born with, s/he can wear makeup to make her/himself feel more attractive to her/himself and others. The same logic can be applied to understanding handwriting as a secondary face. If you are not able to write your own name beautifully on your book cover, ask someone else who can.

By the same token, the assiduous *lianzi* (writing characters repetitively with an intention for improvement) highlights a desire for and enjoyment of self-perfection. It is an effort to project a better image of oneself to the world. It contributes to a better self-image. For years, an important part of my father's daily routine has been to sit in front of the television with pen in hand and paper on the coffee table, writing. The television program is often news or a news commentary and the content of his writing practice is often names or phrases related to what is reported. He is more interested in the look of the writing than its content. For him, it is intrinsically self-pleasing to see lovely characters flowing from the pen. My eight-year-old niece is equally concerned with whether her handwriting 'looks good'. So, grandfather and granddaughter often sit in front of the television side by side for hours, both concentrating on the characters they put to paper. Since my niece has a limited command of written characters, she copies from school textbooks or from example characters her grandfather produces. Then the grandfather will inspect the granddaughter's result, and make comments such as "This character is not written upright (*Zhege zi xiede buzheng*). Write it again. You must make it upright (*Yidingyao xie de zheng*)", or "If you can write such pretty characters at such an early age, you are sure to be good academically (*xiaoxiao nianji, zi xiede zheyang piaoliang, ni jianglai yiding hui dushu*)[24]. This comment,

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ourselves is a reflection of how other people react to us: one's self-concept is the image seen in a social mirror. This is the idea of the 'looking-glass self'. The advantage of the notion of the 'looking-glass self' is that one is able to circumvent the dichotomy of individualistic/egoistic self as opposed to self imbricated in social relations. More importantly, as a conceptual tool, it is extremely useful in the interpretation of handwriting as a social phenomenon in the Chinese context.

[23] I was told by some that it was also intended to impress the teacher as well. The logic is this: If the teacher sees that the name of his/her student on textbook cover is written in good handwriting, s/he is likely to think that the parents are well educated.

[24] The term *hui dushu* is commonly used to mean being academically capable. It literally means being capable or good at reading books. In practice, it means to get good marks on academic subjects consistently, excluding subjects such as music, sports, drawing/painting, etc.

often made by the Chinese, also supports the point I made earlier: Good handwriting is one of the results of achieving sophistication through *wen*, and studying or reading (*dushu*) is beneficial to one's handwriting.

Handwriting as a focal point in the social gaze, however, is not an ordinary one. In the context of social hierarchy, good handwriting is indicative of success in becoming a 'real' person through *wen*, although not necessarily true in reality. As an indication of *wenhua* level, handwriting provides an important secondary face in the web of social interactions. From this perspective, the face of illiterate people is blank. They are unable to present this secondary face for the scrutiny of the others. This equates a deficiency in *wen* (chapter 2). This point is reinforced by what my informant, who worked for a provincial newspaper, told me, "*Zi* is like the face of a person." I asked him how this could be applied to people who could not write. He said, "They do not have *wenhua*. You can at least say that their other face is not complete (*bu wanshan*)." By implication, good handwriting is seen as acquired, not prescribed at birth. It is something you can work on towards perfection.[25] On the one hand, the tireless practising and perfecting of handwriting can be understood as integral to the perfecting and refining of the self, as well as to the acquisition of *wen*. On the other, from the perspective of interpersonal skills, handwriting is one of the key parameters of impression management. For this reason, it is hardly surprising to find such devotion to perfecting handwriting.

In arguing that handwriting is conceived to be a secondary face, I do not suggest that people unanimously prefer beautiful handwriting. In fact, the notion of beauty in handwriting/calligraphy, like a beautiful face, is sometimes seen as equivalent to deception or being untrue to oneself. The most famous exponent of such a view is Fu Shan.[26] His oft-quoted passage goes, "Rather than clever, beautiful, deft and affected, I prefer being awkward, ugly, disconnected, and straightforward (*ningzhuo wuqiao; ningchou wumei, ningzhili wuqinghua; ningzhishuai wuanpai*)" (Ji 1988:352; also quoted in Billeter 1990:126). Clumsy - as opposed to beautiful - and not particularly fluent handwriting is seen as "the physical manifestation of the virtue of sincerity, or artlessness" (McNair 1998:48).

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[25] Here, the Chinese graphology diverges from its Western equivalent in that intentional improvement of handwriting is not considered a deliberate cheat.

[26] Ming calligraphy (1607-1684). See chapter 5 for more information on him.

"The difficult thing about calligraphy is not how to please, but how to avoid trying to please. The desire to please makes the writing trite, its absence makes it ingenious and true" (Liu Xizai, quoted by Leys 1996:31). From this perspective, beauty can be sacrificed if it avoids being affected and insincere. The preference for ugly or clumsy handwriting finds justification in the importance of truthfulness to oneself.

What this also suggests is that one can choose to be either true or untrue to oneself in handwriting. I have come across an interesting article by a newspaper editor for its literary section. He wrote about an incident that happened many years ago.

> 'A few years ago when I was an editor, I received an article from a young lady, together with a cordial and modest letter. The prose described a peaceful and secluded courtyard. Her words caught the atmosphere so vividly that, while reading it, it was as if I was actually meandering inside a painting. Although there were some minute defects in her literary skill, I was totally convinced of her talent. I suspected that the author must have been a cheerful and thinking young lady. However, my only discomfort arose from seeing her sloppy handwriting. I thought, 'an elegant and eligible handwriting can suffice to arouse in readers an aesthetic feeling, thereby adding a more flattering sheen to the contents of the article itself. If only the lady had a good handwriting, it would be like attaching flowers to a splendid brocade (*jinshang tianhua*) - making perfection still more perfect... A girl with a beautiful handwriting! Ah! Not only her prose but also her person would dazzle my eyes with their irresistible splendour.'[27]

So the editor decided to return the article to its young author and demanded it to be copied with better handwriting by the author. The incident catches the complexity of Chinese ideas about handwriting perfectly in a condensed and totally trivial episode of everyday life. On the one hand, there is a tendency to stretch the beauty of handwriting to the beauty of the person. (Examples of this 'stretching' were also made by some people I interviewed in Kunming.) As a result, harmony is expected to exist, first between the mind or the inner spirit (*neixin*, literally means inner heart) and handwriting, then between the handwriting and the physical appearance. On the other hand, it also raises the question of how much handwriting REALLY reflects the character or physical appearance of its producer. In spite of the expectation of person-handwriting congruence, this editor clearly also had an idea that the person was better than her handwriting, and thought that she might do a better job if asked to do so! In this case, her sloppy handwriting was not thought to reflect the person

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[27] Central News Daily (*Zhongyang Ribao*), overseas edition, 13 April 1997.

better. On the contrary, it was thought not to do the person justice, i.e., she should be better than her handwriting!!

So far, there seem to be three coexistent and contradictory ideas about the revelatory power of handwriting. First, we have the conviction that handwriting reveals something (morality, character traits, appearance, etc.) about the person. Then there is also a mistrust for beautiful and deft handwriting, in preference of clumsy, ugly but genuine handwriting. Finally, there are also cases in which sloppy or ugly handwriting is thought to misrepresent the better person. In a word, handwriting can be revelatory or deceptive. Paradoxically, the belief in the revelatory potential of handwriting also makes it possible for people to deceive by handwriting, i.e., to fake 'self' by assuming a handwriting style for the purpose of misleading judgement, either intentionally or unintentionally. Revelatory or deceptive, the common ground is that all three cases assume there should be correspondence between handwriting and the person. These examples, in fact, substantiate the expectation of different degrees of the handwriting-person match. Without a belief in the handwriting-person link, the question of being true or untrue to oneself in handwriting would not be an issue in the first place. Therefore the seemingly divergent complexity of reality, with sinuosity, reconfirms the starting proposition.

In brief, handwriting as a secondary face means that it is a focus of social gaze. People constantly discuss handwriting as key component of, and revealing of, the state of persons as persons. People thus actively work on their handwriting because they want what is revealed to be good. But the question remains: Why is handwriting thought to reveals one's physical appearance and character? I propose that the reason lies in the idea that one's *zi* is considered an extended part of one's body-person. Furthermore, the Chinese habit of sign-reading from bodily forms contributes to the constant urge to read signs into hand written characters. I shall approach the proposition from two angles: first from the theological view of the appreciation of calligraphy, and second from the popular conception found in everyday speech and fortune-telling.

3.3 Calligraphy/Handwriting as the Extension of the Body-Person

It is important to highlight that Chinese ideas about handwriting are intricately enmeshed in the artistic appreciation of calligraphy, the sole medium of writing until the beginning of the 20th century.[28] The Chinese exegesis on the handwriting-person link teems with images of the body or constituents of the body.[29] It is in this sense, rather than as a temporary passage that directs the message of the mind to the surface of paper, that 'body' enters the discourse of Chinese 'graphology'.

3.3.1 The Physiognomy of Calligraphy

Anyone who is even slightly familiar with the established aesthetic vocabulary of Chinese calligraphy would notice its numerous evocation of bodily images. The tendency to talk about calligraphic characters using the terminology of the human body dates back to the very beginning of the tradition of calligraphy criticism (Zhang 1994).[30] It is also a phenomenon noticed and discussed by a number of Western sinologists writing on Chinese calligraphy (Hay 1983; Billeter 1990, etc.). Terms such as bone (*gu*), muscle/sinew (*jin*) and flesh (*rou*), etc., are used profusely in the appreciation or assessment of Chinese calligraphy.

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[28] In an article reminiscing his childhood experience, Zhuang Yin mentioned that modern writing implements such as pencils, fountain pens or ball-point pens were luxury goodsuntil the thirties. Most people used traditional brushes and copper ink boxes with cotton inside them to soak up prepared ink for writing (Zhuang 1999).

[29] Talking about the Chinese conception of the body, Mark Elvin (1989) points out that, for the Chinese, there is a certain degree of conflation of the body and the person. "In most Chinese phrases that translate into English phrase where the ideas of 'person', 'self', 'life' or 'lifetime' are used or implied, the word *shen* appears (Elvin 1989:275)". For instance,

an shen = make peaceful one's body = "settle down in life"
chu shen = put forth one's body = "start one's career"
shen fen = one's bodily allocation = "personal status"
shen shi = body's world = "one's lifetime's experience"
zhong shen = to body's end = "to the end of one's life"
ben shen = basic body = "oneself"
sui shen = following the body = "on one's person"

Therefore, he proposed to translate the Chinese term *shen*, normally translated as 'body' in English, as "body-person". It is also interesting to note that the term *shen*, in the Chinese-English Dictionary published by the *Shangwu* Publishing House in Beijing, has four related subentries. These are body, life, oneself and one's moral character and conduct. In other words, there has always been a conflation between the body and the self in China. The implication of this body-person conflation, I suggest, is that what is experienced by the body is regarded at the same time as the constituent of the person. The 'body and person' issue is yet another concern of this thesis. I shall return to elaborate on the subject in the ensuing chapters (chapters 4&5).

[30] John Hay (1983:74) points out, though, that the existence of physiological imagery in art is universal. He quotes Ernst Kris that "the 'bodily' experience with which we react in front of representations of the human figure suggest a formula of wide application... All perceptual reactions, according to Schiller, are to some extent influenced by the image of the body"(ibid.:74).

Calligraphic characters are treated as possessing these bodily elements.[31] This is not to say that we can find all human bodily parts - such as heart, stomach and liver - in the aesthetic vocabulary of calligraphy. That would be, obviously, far-fetched. One should not attempt to establish such a perfect match. Such an attempt would only prove to be fruitless at best, or irrelevant. A pithy statement on the subject made by one of the most revered calligraphers in Chinese history, Su Shi, provides a good starting point, as well as preemptively evading unnecessary scepticism that impedes rather than facilitates understanding.

> "The five requisites of a piece of successful calligraphy are: aura (*shen*), energy (*qi*), bone (*gu*), flesh (*rou*) and blood (*xue*). With any of the five missing, no work is worthy of the name of calligraphy."[32]

These five elements are indispensable to the Chinese notion of life,[33] as well as to calligraphic characters. In written characters, the Chinese see bodies that can move. Calligraphic characters are not simply propped up by the 'bone' and then 'fleshed out', they are also endowed with the ability of kinetic movement by the 'sinew'. 'Blood' runs through them, moistening and nourishing. One is justified in suspecting that a piece of calligraphic work does not simply take on a visual form. Rather, what it takes on is a life-like form. Among the four calligraphic bodily elements (bone, sinew, flesh and blood), the calligraphic bone deserves special attention. The bone, being one of the loci of the Chinese lineage succession within the body (Watson 1982), is essential to the construction of personhood in Chinese culture, especially the backbone. A person without a backbone or with a feeble one is considered barely a person. It is the symbolic focus of will-force in the

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[31] A translation problem is involved here that may lead the reader to expect a very different thing. As Hay notes, in his often-quoted article on the notion of traditional body found in Chinese medicine and its influence on the calligraphic body-person (Hay 1983), the Chinese have never treated anatomy as a distinct discipline. Billeter reiterates it succinctly, "...the anatomical terms which for us refer to organs, refer in the ancient Chinese language chiefly to *patterns of energy* connected with these organs in one way or another. Thus, "bone" or "backbone" (*gu*) designates the concentrated energy which bears, "muscle" or "sinew" (*jin*) the energy which displaces, "flesh" (*rou*) the energy which is held in reserve and which determines the shape of the body. The "breaths" (*qi*) are the energies which circulate and transform, in other words metabolism and respiration. As for the word *xue*, "blood", [it is translated] as "blood flowing in its veins" in order to convey the fact that this blood is less a liquid than a rhythmic circulation of life through the body" (Billeter 1990:264, italics original). The reader would benefit from bearing in mind these differences in Chinese terms and their English translation.

[32] Su Shi, or known as Su Dongpo (1036-1101, Northern Song dynasty) was not only one of the greatest writers in Chinese history, outstanding in both prose and verse, but also a great painter and calligrapher. He was an opponent of the reform policy of Wang Anshi, the Prime Minister (*zaixiang*) of the time, and his political career alternated between periods of office in the capital and relegation to provincial appointments (*bian*).

[33] For an introduction to traditional Chinese conception of life in a medical sense, see Pockert 1974; Kaptchuk 1983; Unschuld 1985.

Chinese concept of person - where strength of will and dignity is concentrated. For example, people with weak will or who would fawn in order to advance self-interest are said to have soft bones (*ruan gutou*). In contrast, people who are strong-willed and are willing to sacrifice material gains for moral integrity are ones with tough bones (*ying gutou*). From this point of view, a somatified image of written characters is bound to contain backbone, without which a body cannot be propped up with suitable dignity. This assessment of the bone element of calligraphy has been a major way of assessing the rectitude of the calligrapher. Calligraphers with a reputationfor rectitude and loyalty are precisely those whose writing is assessed to be with strong bones or bone force (*guli*).

As an aesthetic canon, these four bodily elements - bone, sinew, blood and flesh - should strike a delicate balance. The most quoted passage on the subject was made by Lady Wei, who was said to be the teacher of Wang Xizhi's - the "Saint of Calligraphy".

> "In the writing of those who are skilful in giving strength of stroke, the characters are 'bony'; in the writing of those who are not skilful in giving strength of strokes, the characters are 'fleshy'.Writing that has strong bone and little flesh is called 'sinewy writing (*jinshu*)'. and writing that is full of flesh and weak bones is called 'inky pigs (*mozhu*)'. A writing that is powerful and sinewy is sage (*sheng*); a writing that lacks power and sinews is like an invalid (*bing*)." (Wei Yue, *Bizhen tu*, in Ji 1988: 412)

As Hay rightly points out, there is a tendency to equate the quality of writing to health (*bing*/sickness), and sagehood (*sheng*) is seen as the ultimate state of health (Hay 1983:85). One of the greatest calligraphy theorists during the Tang dynasty, Zhang Huaiguan (713-760 AD) compared the assessment of calligraphy to that of horses, a much loved animal of the time.

> "Horses with much muscle and little flesh are valued, no great store is set by those with little muscle and much flesh. Calligraphy is judged likewise... If no flesh is allowed to grow on the sinews and the bone, it would be an inferior horse (*nutai*) in the case of horses, and 'inky swine (*mozhu*)' in the case of writing."[34]

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[34] Zhang Huaiguan, *Pingshu yaoshi lun* (Critiques of Calligraphy), in Ji 1988:343. Zhang was appointed by the emperor Tang Xuanzong to take charge of the huge imperial collection of calligraphic works and literature on calligraphy, including the task of authentication and categorisation. In such position, he had the advantage of free access to the impressive imperial collection. This is why he was able to produce some of the most systematic calligraphy critiques and theories in history.

Both authors favour bone force and sinew over flesh in calligraphy. However, other authors, such as Song Cao and Zhu Lüzhen, prefer the balance of bone-sinew and flesh. The combined effect of bone and sinew is structural/formal (*xing*), and that of flesh and blood is the substance (*zhi*). If the structural element dominates without appropriate embellishment of substance, the writing is termed "wizened skeleton (*kugu*)" or "broken firewood (*duanchai*)" (Zhu Lüzhen, *Shuxue jieyao* in Ji 1988:355). In contrast, if a writing is obese (*fei*) with excessive substance but not supported by forceful backbone, it is called "inky swine (*mozhu*)" or "fleshy duck (*rouya*)". If all these four elements hit the right balance, then a piece of calligraphy is seen to have achieved a major aesthetic requirement. Sun Guoting[35] wrote elegantly on the importance of harmony between structure and the embellishment of substance.

> "Having assembled all the attractive qualities, it is important to preserve the inner strength (bone force). Once this is achieved, one can proceed to season the writing with substance. It is like the branches and the trunk of a tree in luxuriant growth. When hit by snow and frost, their strength increases, and like its blossoms and leaves in lush profusion, which reflect the splendour of clouds and sunlight. If the inner strength predominates disproportionately, the vigorous charm would be marred. This is like a strong branch overarching a precipitous incline, and like a huge rock blocking a path: although elegance and charm is lacking, vigour remains. On the contrary if the beauty is outstanding but the inner strength is deficient, it is similar to a fragrant grove on a bed of fallen blossoms, whose splendour has no support; or like an orchid pond covered with floating duckweed - transient verdure without roots. Thus you know that one-sided success is easy to achieve, but perfect beauty is hard to obtain." (translation in Chang & Frankel 1995:13)

The mind-boggling succession of metaphors Sun Guoting uses consistently associate calligraphic structure with inner strength, vigour, root and support; whereas the calligraphic substance is associated with luxuriant growth, verdure, splendour, charm and elegance. While calligraphic bone and sinew give the inky stokes inner strength; the blood and flesh endow them with a lustre of health. The limpidity of water, used to grind the ink stick with, is tantamount to the uncontaminated and unclogged blood regarded as the fluid of life (*xie sheng yu shui*). And the velvety ink, not too dry nor too runny, covers written characters with the gloss of healthy skin and the fullness and roundness of youthful flesh (*rouying*)

[35] Tang calligrapher and theorist (648-703). His *Shupu* is one of the most influential work on calligraphy in Chinese history. It was written in exquisite cursive style, which has been one of the most revered calligraphic model work.

(Zong 1989:327). Although it is preferable to have both the structure and substance in balance, all the authors quoted so far seem to suggest the primacy of structure, especially that of the bone element. The priority of bone over flesh is implied. The former is implied to be essential, and the latter a wonderful but disposable addition.

Along with bone, sinew, blood and flesh, calligraphy also has *shen* and *qi*, two extremely ambiguous and allusive concepts in Chinese culture.[36] As this is not an art-historical study of calligraphy, I do not wish to tamper with these conceptual hot potatoes here. To make things manageable and intelligible for the discussion, I will simply translate *shenqi* (or as two separate terms *shen* and *qi*) as the 'aura' of the whole work. Without this aura, a piece of calligraphic work is stripped down to its bare existence, like a dull chunk of stone no matter how intricately it has been carved and glazed. The aura of calligraphy is thought to be the distinctive atmosphere emanating from the very work. It is unanimously considered, by calligraphy theorists, the decisive aesthetic quality that exalts a piece of work from the level of 'good writing' to the sublimity of great art.[37] The aura is also what distinguishes one calligrapher from another. Not all writing possesses this quality. Inferior writing lacks aura in the same way as a person without distinctive inner spirit is devoid of it. If not attired in aura, writing is but a smudge of indistinctive inked traces without expression. As a result, "A connoisseur of calligraphy looks for the *shen* (the aura) of the work and ignores its form (*xing*) and substance (*zhi*) (i.e., other bodily elements)" wrote Zhang Huaiguan (Ji 1988:362). The anthropomorphized calligraphy possesses not only the physical flesh, none, sinew and blood, it also possesses the immaterial aura - the complete makeup of the calligraphic body-person.

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[36] *Shen* is sometimes treated as a subjective aesthetic experience. Kao comments on the notion of *shen* in literary work, "In the centre, there is the elusive concept of *shen*, which can be as simple as the "essence" and "quality"of the object and as mysterious as the "divine spirit" of nature. Its complexity and changeability are understandable, as it basically denotes the intangible quality of lyrical experience, not possible to translate into ordinary language by definition, but profoundly moving and vivid for the ones who experience it. It is the quality of attaining the idealized state of beauty in arts" (Kao 1986:340). What he seems to suggest is that the intangibility of the notion *shen* resides in the intimacy of experiencing it. In this view, the existence of *shen* is not only in the 'quality' of the person/object/work, it is also in the experience of the perceiver.

[37] See Wang Sengqian, *Biyi zan*, in Ji 1988:361; Zhang Huaiguan, *Wenzi lun*, in ibid.:362; Cai Xiang, *Cai Zhonghuigong wenji*, in ibid.:362; Li Zhiyi, *Guxi ji*, in ibid.:364; Liu Xizai, *Yigai*, in ibid.:377. Parallel to the Western idea about art, the Chinese also draw a sharp, irrevocable line between artwork (*yi*) and artefact (*ji*) (cf. Clunas 1997; Cahill 1994). Though the assessment is not based on visual attraction but on the eloquence in providing a perspective that transcends mere visual attraction.

Just as the person (calligrapher) is made by these bodily elements, his/her calligraphy is also constituted by them. The resemblance is striking. The bodily makeup of calligraphy, at some points, seems to me not metaphorical at all. Instead, the firmness of tone in these treatises suggests that they really believe that a piece of writing is constituted of these bodily parts, but with different physical constitution! However, the attempt by some calligraphy theorists to locate calligraphic bodily parts technically seems to, somehow, defy such speculation.[38] Metaphors or not, this calligraphic body seems to suggest that there exists a 'structural isomorphy' between the calligraphy/handwriting and the person who writes it, given the considerations that, for instance, a person with backbone writes characters with strong bone force and the *shenqi* of the writing is coherent with the *shenqi* of the person. However, the 'structural isomorphy' I suggest here should not be taken literally. One cannot start a detailed investigation into how the bodily structures of the two correspond to each other. The 'structural isomorphy' between handwriting/calligraphy and the person serves as a conceptual tool, and nothing more, to highlight the conceived continuity between the two. Hay (1983) also rejects the idea that the calligraphic body is metaphorical. He argues that "the aesthetic vocabulary that anthropomorphizes calligraphy derives from traditional medicine." These usages are not metaphorical since calligraphy is, in Hay's words, "A line

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[38] The notion of bodily parts of calligraphy has been given technical foundations by various calligraphy theorists, such as Chen Yizeng of the Yuan dynasty, Fong Fang of the Ming dynasty and modern calligraphy theorist Ding Wenjuan. Fong Fang wrote "Calligraphic characters are physically constructed of sinew, bone, blood and flesh: The sinew of written characters is produced by the mastery of wrist movement. If one can hold the wrist in a firm suspension position while writing, the characters will certainly be stringed with pulsating energy and jointed by sinews without appearing scattered. Once this is achieved, the overall dynamism will ensue from the agility of brush movement, which is guaranteed by the supple manipulation of wrist movement. The backbone of written characters is a product of firm grasp of the brush in one's fingers. The strength of fingers is transmitted to the upright support of the characters so that they do not slouch on paper with nonchalance and lethargy. Furthermore, the blood of characters comes from the water, and the flesh from the ink. It is important to use water newly scooped out of well and ink freshly prepared from ink stick and ink stone. This is the only way to guarantee the optimal balance of moisture and dryness of ink, which is the determinant of the flesh quality - the obesity or slenderness - of written characters. All these reasons explain why the ancient masters were fastidious about the tools for writing" (in *Shujue*). Ding Wenjuan, a modern calligraphy theorist, elaborated Fong Fang's theory, "For human beings the bone skeleton structures the physique and the sinew is in charge of the rotation and movement. The skeleton needs to be strong and the sinew needs to be nimble. Likewise for calligraphy, if the strokes are forceful, it has bones; if they are feeble, then the calligraphy does not have bones. If the strokes are nimble, then the calligraphy has sinew (*jin*); if they are rigid and stiff, the calligraphy lacks sinew" (quoted in Zong 1989:327). In order to produce forceful strokes, one must make sure that there is no unnecessary brush movement and ink is concentrated. This is a result of firm grasp of brush in the fingers. In other words, the bone of calligraphy comes from the fingers (*gu sheng yu zhi*). As to the sense of movement beaming from calligraphic characters, it is attributed to the fact that the wrist is not supported by any surface during execution (*xuanwan*). This wrist position is cleverly designed to exploit every kinetic subtlety of which human hand is capable, granted that the forearm and the wrist are free to make large unrestricted movements. The 'sinew effect' is the result of this agility of hand movement. In other word, the sinew of calligraphy comes from the wrist (*jin sheng yu wan*).

of energy materialising through the brush into the ink trace". In this respect, a "vein (*mo*) of ink that pulses in the rhythm of the painter's own arteries (also *mo*), is an extension of the painter's real body" (Zito 1997:42). From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine (some may prefer to call it Daoism), calligraphy is the embodiment of the energy flow that circulates between the universe and human bodies. As a result, calligraphy/handwriting is, in a literal sense, the extension of the body-person. However, such deduction runs the risk of intellectualism, that is, only the learned would be able to offer this exegesis. Notorious as an extremely comprehensive and inclusive theoretical construct, the notion of energy and energy flow, metamorphosed into notions, such as *qi*, *mo*, and *feng*, can be stretched to explain anything - the equivalent of nothing. Dissatisfied with this conceptual rubber band, I intend to approach the problematic - handwriting as an extension of the body-person - from everyday practices in order to concretise it in everyday experience.

3.3.2 Revealing Bodily Forms

To start from linguistic expressions of everyday speech, the most commonly used phrases to describe someone's handwriting follow this formula:

A *xie de yishou* + (adjective) + *zi*

Person A writes a hand of + (an adjective) + characters.

Example			
		① beautiful	
		② sloppy	
X writes a	+	③ dragon-flying-and-phoenix-dancing (lively and vigorously flourishing)	+ hand of characters.
		④ elegant and delicate	
		⑤ messy	

(① *piaoliang de* ② *liaocao de* ③ *longfei fengwu de* ④ *xiuqi de* ⑤ *luanqi bazao de*)

'A hand of (*yishou*) so-and-so (an adjective) characters (*zi*)' is the most commonly used phrase to talk about someone's handwriting. For example, when one says "So-and-so *xie de yishou haozi*", it literally means that so-and-so writes a hand of good characters. My own

handwriting has often been described as "a hand of dragon-flying-and-phoenix-dancing characters (*yishou longfei fengwu de zi*, see example ③ above)". The phrase '*yishou de* (a hand of)' suggests that, for the Chinese, *xiezi* is closely associated with the hand. In fact, celebrities' handwriting is often called their *shouji* (lit. the trace of the hand). The straightforward and intuitive interpretation is that writing is carried out with the hand. However, in a literal sense, handwriting may also be more constructively considered as an 'extension' of the hand. There is an invisible umbilical cord connecting hand-written characters and the person via the hand. Handwriting, though detached from the physical body of the writer, is nevertheless treated as an objectified piece of the writer's body-person.

It is worth noting that the notion of a person/self unbounded by the physical body has, in recent years, become a paradigm in anthropological writing, especially that on Melanesian societies fashioned as 'fractal personhood' (Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991) or 'distributed personhood' (Gell 1998). In a similar vein, handwriting is, in Gell's word (ibid.), an 'index' of the person. "[Unlike signs,] abduction from an index does characteristically involve positing a substantive part-whole (or part-part) relation" (ibid.:104) - handwriting as the part and person as the whole. The calligraphic person, though detached from the physical body, is nevertheless seen as a constituent of the entirety of the personhood. As a result, handwriting or calligraphy should be seen as a part of the distributed body-person. Most interestingly, this "substantive part-whole relationship", established through handwriting as an index of the person, is actively sought out by the Chinese themselves, rather than an etic interpretation provided by theorists.[39] Once this understanding is established, it becomes clearer why the newspaper literary editor should feel upset by the disparity between the appearance of the handwriting and his idea of the person/writer. It is similar to being struck by a voice that does not seem to match the look of the talker.

If one accedes to this interpretation, then the puzzle concerning why the Chinese are strongly inclined to read into one's personality, physical appearance or even moral qualities through handwriting is only a step from being solved. I propose that the habit of reading into a person through handwriting is but one tributary of the whole waterway of

[39] In this understanding of the handwriting-person relationship, in contrast to the Euro-American graphology mentioned earlier, no mediation of mind is involved.

body-sign reading tradition (*xiangshu*).[40] Wang Chong, an influential sceptic of the first century, described by Needham as "one of the greatest men China ever produced" (Needham & Ronan 1978 (I):203-4), believed that "the fate of individuals are inherent in their bodies; just as with birds, the distinction between cocks and hens exists already in the eggshell" (Needham & Ronan 1978 (I):211). He argued that human destiny (*ming*) is endowed by heaven (*tian*) and is displayed on the body (*renming bingyu tian, zeyou biaohou yu ti*). This may seem no more than a forceful statement by an eccentric thinker from the ancient past - although containing a grain of truth from the perspective of modern biology. What is more interesting is that, through centuries, the physical appearance of historical figures has always been used as an indication or confirmation of their conduct. For example, the best-known tyrant in Chinese history *Qin Shihuang* was depicted, in *Shiji* (Record of History), as "having a pointed and prominent nose that resembles a scorpion with a raised tail; having narrow and long eyes, chest thrown out and shoulders tightly erect like a ferocious eagle; having a voice like the howls of jackals and wolves". The verdict given by the author of *Shiji*, Sima Qian (considered the greatest historian in Chinese history) is this: Such a person is ruthless and ferocious. When he is not in power, he displays modesty; as soon as he obtains power, he waits no time to devour you. As a result, *Qin Shihuang* turned all his subjects into slaves once he ruled the country.[41] Smith also points out that "nineteenth century Western accounts testify to the popularity of physiognomy and related practices, particularly among the Chinese elite" (Smith 1991:187-8) and "A great many Qing civil and military officials relied on physiognomers for advice" (ibid.:188).

In this tradition, any sign from the complex of bodily forms is considered a legitimate indication of personality, intelligence, fate (*ming*)[42] or moral qualities. These eligible bodily forms range from the physique, bone structures, complexion (*qise*), facial structure, lines and bumps of the palm, finger shapes, feet, to knuckle and moles (Jing 1994:335-345; Smith 1991). For example, "a round and smooth forehead was viewed as a

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[40] Originally, *xiangshu* was applied to the assessment of a wide range of things, including the location and structure of buildings, the bone structure of humans and animals and the external forms of utensils and objects. The external forms were believed to be indicative of the course of nature (Jing 1994:335).

[41] *Shiji, Qin Shihuang benji*, vol 6. For a discussion on Qin Shihuang's life and work, see Granet 1930:36-41.

[42] For a fuller treatment of the historical development of the notion of *ming* in China, see Brokaw 1991:52-60.

sign of honour, just as a broad and square chin signified wealth" (Smith 1991:189-90). Take eyes for example, "long, deep and bright eyes signify great honour; narrow, delicate and deep eyes, longevity; eyes like dots of black varnish reflect intelligence; short and small eyes, stupidity; more white than black, a hard life. Round and protruding eyes are considered a sign of early demise; prominent, protruding and watery eyes, the mark of debauchery and lawlessness. Red eyeballs suggest evil; triangular eyes, cruelty" (ibid.:193). Since handwriting is considered an extension of the body-person, it is perfectly logical that the hunger for revealing signs would also target handwriting.[43] In a word, if the Euro-American graphology is secured on the assumption of a mindless body that inevitably reveals the mind, then the Chinese version is tightly embroidered to the tradition of bodily-sign reading. Handwriting, considered as an extension of the body-person, makes a suitable candidate for the Chinese love of sign reading from bodily forms. Furthermore, handwriting as an extension of the body-person also helps to account for the demand for public inscriptions by political leaders depicted in the introduction. What the Chinese look for in these inscriptions is not superior beauty, but "the reflection or the incarnation of their leader's personality" (de Beaufort 1978:52).

If handwriting is considered an extension of the body-person and can be perfected through practice in Chinese culture, there must, at the same time, exist a system of engineering specially designed (obviously not by any individual) and devoted to the integration of the conceptual self and the inked self (handwriting). Accounting for this integrative engineering is the subject of analysis in the ensuing two chapters.

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[43] It is worth noting that the underlying rationale of all these bodily sign-reading practices is the theory of *yin-yang* (the bipolar forces) and five-element theory (*yinyang wuxing*) (Jing 1994:335-345). The idea can be summed up this way: Since all beings find their origin in the pattern of interaction of the bipolar forces of *yin-yang* and the five elements, one's bodily forms and personality/fate share exactly the same origin. In other words, the bodily forms of a person correspond to the pattern of the interactions among the bipolar forces and the five elements, so is one's fate shaped according to that pattern. It is why one is supposed to read the tangible (e.g., the bodily forms) in order to decipher the intangible (fate, personality, etc.).

4. Body-Person Engineering through Ink and Brush: Brush Techniques & Calligraphic Composition

Chapters four and five will focus on the 'technical support' behind the idea of the link between handwriting and person. This will include brush techniques, calligraphic composition and the bodily implications of calligraphic training. These chapters can also be seen as an attempt to ground the acquisition of *wen* on material and bodily experience (Bray 1997:372). In this chapter, an account of the brush techniques and calligraphic composition will be provided first as a whole for the sake of reading continuity. It will conclude with a brief analysis of this material - the ideological connotation of the bodily disposition involved in the training of brush techniques and compositional principles.

Analysis in this chapter is intentionally brief because further discussion on the learning process (chapter 5) is necessary before more extensive analysis can be made. In other words, chapter 4 and 5 should be treated as one analytical unit. This format provides a glimpse of what is actually involved in the practice of writing Chinese calligraphy. Admittedly, this is a 'theological version' of calligraphy (therefore an insider's view[1]) as a practice as opposed to a popular view (the outsider's view). I am aware that highly technically detailed material, especially presented at such length, can be taxing on the reader's patience. However, lengthy descriptions of technical details of indigenous practice are not without precedents in anthropology (e.g., Firth 1966; Gell 1998). It is important here because it depicts what calligraphy practitioners actually talk about and concern themselves with. Unless one tries to understand what people who practice calligraphy believe they aim to achieve and how they articulate this effort, social interpretations of any kind run the risk of being a violent imposition. The dominant native exegesis of the calligraphic practice, elitist as it may be, should not be dismissed or excluded before it even enters the eyes of the reader. Above all, I want to stress that these are precisely the techniques that account for

[1] By 'insider', I refer to those who treat calligraphy as their hobby, passion or profession. This includes practising calligraphers, calligraphy theorists and calligraphy aficionados. I realise the evasive nature of the term 'insider', especially when one takes into consideration the pervasiveness of the practice. The complexity of the issue can be understood within the framework of 'ascending the tower of knowledge' as discussed in chapter 2. The 'insiders' are those on the higher end of the continuum.

the enchanting power of calligraphy - a point that will be analysed further in the conclusion.

On top of these concerns, I am also faced with the serious challenge of introducing the reader to the world of calligraphy, assuming that s/he has no prior knowledge of it. Meanwhile, I must avoid reproducing a textbook or manual style account of calligraphy, as seen in numerous calligraphy manuals. After all, this is what anthropological works aim to achieve, i.e., to present a whole panoply of experiences that are alien or unfamiliar to the reader, yet lived by people of another society/culture. All this has to be achieved in very limited space. With this caution in mind, I shall embark on an introductory tour to the secrets of the trade. The foremost secret of Chinese calligraphy lies in the brush techniques.

4.1 Brush Techniques

4.1.1 The Tools of the Art

In order to appreciate the extremely versatile and fluid shapes of calligraphic dots, lines and curves, it is necessary to examine closely the main tools of the trade, i.e., the brush and the ink. "The calligraphic brush is a typical product of Chinese ingenuity: It marries deceptive simplicity of a structural principle with utter subtlety and versatility of its actual application" (Leys 1996). The brush is nothing more than a bunch of hair of varying lengths tied together on the top, then glued and inserted into the open end of a bamboo stick holder. A special way of binding the hair enables the brush to contain a reservoir for ink. The simplicity of the structure allows for applicational subtlety and versatility. The very suppleness and resilience of the brush guarantees the richness in expression of forms, albeit with a proportional degree of difficulty in handling. Far from being monochrome and stable, as one might imagine, calligraphic ink offers a wide range of nuances responding to the strength and the speed of the rise and fall of the brush. The tones, thickness, the moist and dryness of the ink, the lingering, the swift gliding, the twists and turns of the brush, all these contribute to the unrepeatable calligraphic symphony. In the lifting and lowering of the brush, the absorbent paper (*xuanzhi*) records the scudding inflection of the brush as faithfully as a pond of clear water reflects the shadows of scudding clouds chased by the wind.

Apart from the basic tools, one should also understand how Chinese calligraphers normally talk about the brush strokes produced by the tools of utter simplicity. The ultimate concern about calligraphic brush strokes is their lifelikeness.

4.1.2 Life, Force and Rhythmic Movement of Brush Strokes

As the brush sweeps over the paper's surface, each brushstroke is supposed to be instilled with a sense of life. The life of brush strokes is obviously not exhibited in cycles of inhaling and exhaling of the air. It exists, instead, in the *shi* of brush strokes. *Shi*, in Chinese, means power, force, influence or tendency.[2] The *shi* of brush strokes (*bishi*) can mean the bearing or gesture of calligraphic forms. It also implies the suggestive movement of brush strokes.[3] Since the notion of *shi* or *bishi* has remained rather obscure and undefined in the writing on Chinese calligraphy, it may help to clarify the notion by first introducing some terms used in the discussion of artworks in the West. The notion of *shi* or *bishi* in Chinese calligraphy is intricately bound with the perception of visual dynamics (Yu 1990). The visual dynamics of a form (of graphics or objects), as suggested by Arheim (1974), is the product of formative processes. And the formative process involves constant changes of force. For example, "Snails in building their shells offer an example of rhythmical construction. The shells are made from excretions of liquid chalk paste, which is shaped by rhythmical motions of the body and then crystallizes. Snail's shells are fixed expressive movements of the first order" (Arheim 1974:417, citing Max Burchartz). In other words, the visual dynamics of form is often, though not always, created by corresponding physical forces. The motorial act leaves an imprint on the produced form. Although Arheim went on to say that works of art are seldom produced physically by the forces perceived in their shapes, I do not think this statement applies to Chinese calligraphy. As will become clear as the discussion in this section develops, the *shi* in Chinese calligraphy is understood precisely from the perspective of interacting forces during the execution. The physical force is thought to be translated, though perhaps not linearly, into visual force displayed in brush strokes. In brief, I suggest that the predominant concern in Chinese calligraphy with the *shi* is precisely the concern for

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[2] For a study of the notion of *shi*, translated as propensity, as a key to understand the intricate and coherent structure underlying Chinese modes of thinking and representing reality, see Jullien 1995.

[3] The notion of 'the (suggestive) movement of graphic forms' is dismissed by Arheim (19) because it assumes that visual dynamics derive from the experience of locomotion. Besides, it also assumes that the qualities perceived in images that suggest movement are a full or partial re-enactment of such actual locomotion. He claimed that both these assumptions were incorrect, therefore proposed to replace the notion of graphic movement with the notion of "directed tension" when talking about visual dynamics.

visual force displayed in brush strokes.

As a result of this concern, the literature on calligraphy is replete with metaphors describing this physically invisible, yet clearly perceptible artistic reality. In his influential theoretical work written in the seventh century, '*Treatise on Calligraphy* (*shupu*)', Sun Guoting wrote:

> "Consider the difference between the 'suspended needle (*xuanzhen*)' and 'hanging dewdrop (*chuilu*)' brush strokes, and then consider the marvels of rolling thunder and toppling rocks, the postures of the wild geese in flight and beasts in fright, the attitudes of phoenixes dancing and snakes startled, the power of sheer cliffs and crumbling peaks, the shapes of facing danger and holding on to rotten wood, which are sometimes heavy like threatening clouds and sometimes light like cicada wings; consider that when the brush moves, water flows from a spring, and when the brush stops, a mountain stands firm; consider what is very, very light, as if the new moon were rising at the sky's edge, and what is very, very clear like the multitude of stars arrayed in the Milky Way - these are the same as the subtle mysteries of nature: they cannot be forced" (translation in Chang & Frankle 1995).

The passage answers, in a highly poetic way, the question of how the pulsation of inky lines and dots, i.e., the visual dynamics of brush strokes, is visualized by Chinese calligraphers. When the brush stroke is heavy and full of strength, it has the fierceness of rolling thunders. Whereas it is as delicate and gentle as the cicada's wing when the brush stroke expresses an exquisite tenderness and softness. When the brush glides freely over the paper's surface, it possesses the smoothness of movement of a dancing phoenix; yet when it comes to an abrupt halt, it is as if the whole energy of the calligrapher is concentrated at the brush tip just like a startled snake gathering all its strength ready for a fight. All kinds of natural phenomena are at Chinese calligraphers' disposal to aid their imagination. The world of nature is the inexhaustible resource of artistic inspiration for calligraphers. Through the observation of nature, they detect the principles of movement and rhythm (cf. Lin 1983; Chaves 1977). "The brush of a Chinese calligrapher makes the conveyance of every type of rhythmic movement possible" (Lin 1939:276).

However, it is never the ostensible appearance of the natural world which intrigues Chinese calligraphers. So when one says that Monk Wen Yuke realised the law

of the cursive script (*caoshu*) from observing a violent fight between two snakes,[4] one does not expect his calligraphy to resemble the morphology of battling snakes. It is rather the rhythm of the movement - the swiftness in attack and counter-attack - the highly controlled release and withholding of concentrated energy, and the composition of two grappling lines (snakes) that inspired the choreography of his brush dance. This point is confirmed by one of my calligrapher informants, "Wen Yuke grasped the essence of brush techniques from watching two snakes fighting. Zhang Xu[5] also learned his brush techniques from watching a street porter with shoulder poles trying to go past a princess in a narrow street (*gongzhu danfu zhengdao*). The crux is the rhythm (*yunlü he jiezo*) and the control of force."

Another example may help bring the life and force of calligraphic strokes, which concern Chinese calligraphers, more vividly to our eyes. In *'Chart of Brush Manoeuvres* (*bizhen tu*)', Lady Wei[6] wrote,

> "An elongated horizontal line should consist of the openness of an array of clouds stretching for thousands of miles. A dot should contain the energy of a rock falling from a mountain peak. A *pie* (sweeping-left stroke) should resemble an ivory tusk in its luminous smoothness and unrestrained curvature. A vertical line ought to resemble an ancient cane drooping from the tree in its stability and serenity. A *na* (sweeping-right stroke) has to contain the orgiastic vigour of rolling waves and crushing thunder and lightening."

According to this ancient text, one of the most quoted paragraphs in the history of writing on calligraphy, every brush stroke is supposed to be charged with a force, gentle or vehement, which is almost translucently pure in its quality. As a result, no dots should be indifferently flabby, and no lines can afford to appear nonchalantly lethargic. They are so intense and sensitive that one questions whether the calligrapher can finish a piece of work

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[4] Wen Tong (1018-1079), calligrapher of Northern Song, also known as a painter. The incident is recorded in Wen's own writing "On Cursive Style (*Lun caoshu*)" (Hong & Shen 1984:54).

[5] Tang Dynasty calligrapher (active 713-740 AC), famous for his cursive style calligraphy. He was given the nickname "mad drunkard (*zuidian*)"by his contemporaries because of his fondness for wine. When he was very drunk, he would cry out and carry on like a madman, then wrote. He sometimes even wrote with his hair, instead of a brush, soaked in ink (Hong & Shen 1984:37). The incident mentioned by my informant is about Zhang's witnessing of a quarrel between a princess and a street porter. "The porter tried to rush his way through so as not to be checked on his course, but the princess barred his way and defied him from her palanquin or from her horseback (under the Tang women of the aristocracy rode just as men did)" (Billeter 1990:178). Zhang is also said, as his own writing indicates, to have got inspiration from watching the movement of a famous dancer of his time.

[6] Calligrapher in the Western Jin Dynasty, 272-349. She is said to be the master of Wang Xizhi, the "Saint of Calligraphy (*shusheng*)".

without being drained of energy. The intensity of brushwork is, no doubt, exaggerated by the powerful metaphors. Nevertheless, it reflects the tremendous emphasis on the orchestration of forces (*li*) in the execution.

4.1.3 Paradox of Force: the Prerequisite of Unstable Balance

So far, one might get the impression that Chinese calligraphy is, counter-intuitively, all about strength and force. I say 'counter-intuitively' because the construction of a delicate brush seems to defy any link to strength. The overall image of the brush is nothing but softness and lightness. Simply take a look at an ordinary-sized brush. All the component parts of a brush are objects that conform to the image of light-weightiness: a section of hollowed bamboo stick and a small bundle of animal hair. A brush capable of effortlessly producing a written character measuring 10 square inches weighs no more than ten grams. So how can such a tool be responsible for an art whose essential principle is controlled force?

The crux of the puzzle is linked to one of the most bewildering aesthetic principles of Chinese calligraphy - the deliberate reverse of intention and effect. Put plainly, when one really intends to go left, one should pretend to go right! And in order to capture your enemy, you pretend to release them into freedom (*yuqin guzong*)! It is the very suppleness of the brush tip that makes it hard to handle - to make it go the way you want it to, while producing the intended graphic effect. If no strength is executed, the brush can do nothing more than it appears to be able to, the result of which is irregular-shaped and flabby strokes. This would be a result of men dominated by objects. In order to shift the position of domination, subtle exercise of strength is considered necessary. Meanwhile, great effort is also required to disguise the strength, for apparent force is too blatant for an art of such exquisite sensitivity. Residing in this paradox is an aesthetic goal of Chinese calligraphy, that is, a smooth stream of changeable forces. This demands technical skills that can only be learnt after years of assiduous practice. In other words, an accomplished calligrapher will practice hard to make his work appear effortless (see chapter 7). It is this effortlessness of performance for which great strength is needed. Two seemingly contradictory elements are supposed to reconcile and resonate in order to form an unstable balance (*donggan* or *dongtai pingheng*). This is valued above all in the Chinese art of writing, and makes Chinese

calligraphy an art of purest rhythmic movement (Lin 1939:277-281).[7]

So far, I have emphasised the importance of force in Chinese calligraphy. However, one ought not misunderstand it and begin to associate calligraphic skill with the size of a writer's arm muscles! Perhaps picking up an egg with chopsticks provides a useful analogy. What matters is not how much strength you impose on the egg, but at what angles the chopsticks touch the eggshell and how forcefully you press the chopsticks with each finger at those angles. In other words, it is the 'orchestration of forces', rather than the force as such, that occupies the central stage of the "ballet of the brush" (Mindich 1990).[8] Enthusiasts of Chinese calligraphy are most likely to be familiar with an anecdote about the two father-and-son calligraphy gurus: When Wang Xianzhi (the son) was a small boy, Wang Xizhi (the father)[9] once sneaked up to the son while he was practising calligraphy and tried to pull out the brush from his hand. But he failed. So the father predicted that his son would be a distinguished calligrapher. Unfortunately, a false conviction centring on this anecdote has been widely circulated since. The wrong message, deriving from reading the text too literally, is to equate the strength used to hold the brush with artistic excellence. If we look at the path which 'strength' must follow from its source, the calligrapher's body, to the surface of paper, we realize that it is not straightforward. On the way through the body to its final realization on paper, the force travels through many 'checkpoints'[10] - elbow, wrist, knuckles. Through the fingers it finally meets the brush, then the force passes through thousands of hairs to meet the paper, which is the final destination of the journey. At every joint, the force can be passed on in one of many metamorphosed forms, depending on such factors as angle and time. Clearly, the intensity of force is far from the only determining factor. Therefore, how stubbornly one clings to the brush is by no means a reliable indicator

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[7] Billeter (1990) proposed using the Chinese term to distinguish the art from the kind of *belles letters* that the West is familiar with. As Billeter pointed out, calligraphy in the West produces arrested forms, whereas the Chinese *shufa* is in essence an art of movement.

[8] The analogy drawn between Chinese calligraphy and dance or music is very popular among both Western and Chinese specialists. Generally speaking, the analogy is based on the resemblance in rhythmic movement of the brush and the temporal aspect of the execution.

[9] Wang Xizhi (321-379 or 307-365 or 303-361) is revered as the "Saint of Calligraphy". Together with his son, Wang Xianzhi (344-386), they, "Two Wangs (*er wang*)", especially the father, are regarded as artistic paragons in the history of Chinese calligraphy. In fact, the whole history of Chinese calligraphy after it has reached maturity in Jin Dynasty, can be understood as an oscillation between dominant styles that either have strong affinity with Wang Xizhi's style or deliberately break away from his imposing influence (Chen 1997).

[10] Here I am aware of the naïvety of treating force as if it were a parcel to be passed forward.

of artistic excellence. Instead, it is the mastery of the coordination of all these factors that lie behind mastery of the calligraphic brush.

4.1.4 Speed & Force

As well as worshipping the importance of force, calligraphy enthusiasts also venture into detailed technical examinations of the skills needed to express the 'sense of force' (*ligan*) in brush strokes. Having dominated the centre of the elite cultural stage for thousands of years, it is hardly surprising that an extensive literature on brush techniques has been produced. This in turn has sensitised people's understanding of the expressive power of 'lines (*xiantiao*)'. There are two main focuses for discussion on this issue. The first is about how to hold the brush (*zhibi*), the second on how to manoeuvre it (*yunbi* or *yongbi*). With limitations on space, I will not launch into a detailed discussion on brush-holding technique. Instead, I will concentrate on brush-manoeuvring techniques, particularly the aspects relevant to the use of force. Let us start from a widely quoted passage on the use of force by celebrated calligraphy theorist, Sun Guoting:

> "Some are eager to be swift without having learned how to linger; others are intent on being slow without mastering speed. In fact, force combined with speed is the key to superb beauty, and deliberate lingering leads to perfect appreciation and comprehension. If you proceed from lingering to speed, you will reach a world of consummate beauty; but if you get stuck in lingering, you will miss the ultimate perfection. Being able to move quickly without haste - that is what may be called true lingering; but lingering for the sake of delay - how can this be considered appreciative understanding? Unless the mind is at ease and the hand skilled, it is difficult to achieve both speed and lingering" (Chang & Frankle 1995:12-3).

Though widely quoted, it is not the easiest paragraph to comprehend. So why did this Tang calligraphy master pay such attention to the speed of moving the brush? He nearly equated the mastery of speed with calligraphic perfection. The answer is that speed is never as simple as how fast one moves the brush. In fact what determines the speed is the force. In other words, a subtle play of forces results in what Sun called "lingering" and "swiftness". Before proceeding to another explorative excursion into the world of calligraphic force, I want to clear a puzzle deriving from the quote. Sometimes Sun seemed to value lingering; but at other time he clearly condemned it. Obviously he tried to strike a balance between slowness and swiftness. But what lies behind this 'balance'? Can it be a sheer play of words that conveniently avoids two extremes? If one accepts such an easy interpretation, one

would be very disappointed while fumbling through shelves of literature on Chinese calligraphy. 'Compromise between two extremes' or 'the middle way' is one of the most predominant features of reasoning employed by Chinese intellectuals since ancient times.[11] But in this case, my interpretation is that Sun was trying to convey a message far more specific than a simple toying with dialectics. The puzzling fog will soon clear during the discussion on 'the techniques of force' that follows.

4.1.5 Three Characteristics of Force in Brush Techniques

Perhaps I should recapitulate an aforementioned argument in this way: The 'sense of force' in calligraphic brush strokes is the life-giving element. A corollary of this is: Once we anatomize the structure and interplay of these forces, we are not far from the very essence of this art form. I mentioned earlier that the deft play of force is the cause of varied speed. So if we can understand the characteristics of the expression of force, we can certainly decipher the puzzle about speed as well. There are three characteristics of expressive force in brush techniques summed up in three words (Chen 1993:133-145) - inversion (*nì*), withholding (*xu*), and sluggishness (*liu*).

A. **Inversion (*Nì*)**

Da Chongguang (1623-1692, a Qing Dynasty painter/calligrapher) wrote of brush techniques: "In order to write a stroke in accordance with the general direction of movement, one has to hold the brush in a way that it seems to go in the opposite direction" (*Shufǎ*, in *Lidai*, 561). He then listed seven instances when the brush is supposed to do exactly the opposite to the apparent grain of the graphic indication. The underlying logic to these paradoxes is that the stronger the force of reaction, the bigger the friction between the brush hair and the paper surface. What follows is an enforced effort involved in the brush movement. In this effort, an invisible, yet vivid sense of force is quietly imbued into the forms. By doing so, the deliberate pursuit of technical inversion creates extra weight and substance to lines. The effect is best elucidated in the example of rowing a boat upstream.

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[11] This is in the same line as the *yin-yang* inter-penetration strand of reasoning. Nothing essentially pure is held in high respect. Perfection is always about hitting the right balance between thesis and antithesis. But so far as where exactly the balance lies, it is mostly left un-elaborated. It is somewhere in that foggy zone of self-exploration.

Once a celebrated Song scholar, Ouyang Xiu[12], joked with his friend, Cai Xiang[13], about his calligraphy, "Your calligraphy is like sailing upstream in a violent river - after draining yourself of energy, you are still at the same spot" (quoted in Chen 1993:136). Surprisingly, Cai was very pleased with the comment in spite of Ouyang's seemingly teasing tone. To Cai, the analogy pointed out the valuable '*nì*' quality in his brushwork, therefore its superiority. Imbued with hidden force, the characters, as it were, acquired the qualities of life, full of vigour and vivacity.

How do contemporary calligraphers talk about the use of force? When I asked a professional calligrapher based in Kunming, to talk about the use of force, he said,

> "The use of force (*yongli*) in calligraphy is related to direction (*fangxiang*). For example, to write the horizontal line (*heng*), the apparent direction of movement is from the left to the right. But in order to increase the intensity of force (*lidu*), you have to make the brush hair move in the opposite direction (*mao ni*). If the hair is reversed, then the stroke will be heavy (*mao ni ze ningzhong*). There is an action of pushing (*tui de dongzuo*). Take the vertical line (*shu*) as another example, the apparent direction of movement is from the top downwards. But in actual execution, the attack (*luobi*, means the moment when the brush touches the surface of the paper) has to go upwards then downwards in order to increase the visual force (*shijue lidu*). It's like using a suspended awl to draw on sand (*zhui hua sha*) and also like the water marks left on the wall when the roof leaks (*wulou hen*). Otherwise, there won't be the sense of weight and imposing dignity (*ningzhong*), and the force won't be able to penetrate through the paper either (*litou zhibei*). Sun Guoting says in *Shupu* that the use of force and the tool are inseparable. The tool is basically the same, but what's written varies a lot. The reason lies in the direction of force."

As long as the strokes are produced as a result of counteracting forces, even very thin lines will be guaranteed full body and substance, invigorated, irrespective of dry or moist inking, and irrespective of what shape it takes. On the contrary, if the brush is allowed to glide and

[12] Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) was the acknowledged leader of the literary world of his generation and a major political figure. He believed strongly in the practical application of Confucianism to politics. He is renowned for his *ci*, poetry written to certain tunes with strict tonal patterns and rhyme schemes, in fixed numbers of lines and words, originating in the Tang Dynasty, and fully developed in the Song Dynasty.

[13] Cai Xiang (1012-1067), together with Su Shi, Huang Tingjian and Mi Fu, was revered as one of the "Four Great Masters (*si dajia*)" of Northern Song dynasty. He was a high court official (Minister of Finance in today's language). Interestingly, the 'Cai' in the Four Great Masters in Northern Song "Su, Huang, Mi, Cai (the surnames of the four masters)" originally referred to Cai Jing. But Cai Jing was regarded a treacherous court official (*jianchen*) (cf. cha. 3, footnote 11), so later his name was deleted from the Four Great Masters. Cai Xiang, agreed to be an upright court official, replaced Cai Jing's place in the Four Great Masters (Xu 1992:203-4).

float over the paper without counteracting forces, the resulting strokes will invariably be bereft of the very countenance of healthy life. Thick and moist lines will appear obese (*fei*) and sagging; whereas thin and dry ones sallow and scraggy (*lougu*). The sense of tautness and power resulting from the execution of a reversed force constitutes the first prerequisite of calligraphic beauty directly linked to the play of force on the brush tip.

B. Withholding (*Xu*)

Xu, in Chinese, means to store up, to reserve for future use. In a literal sense, it means withholding the exhibition of force lest it becomes too blatant and showy. It is to transform an eruptive outpouring energy into a kind of fully controlled reservoir of power, an inconspicuous yet perpetual readiness to act. Materialized in calligraphy, the attitude echoes the tenet: "No vertical lines should be left with a downright ending without collecting the momentum and twisting it upwards again; likewise, no horizontal lines are supposed to come to a complete halt without the brush movement being totally gathered and energy flow withheld again (*wuchui busuo; wuwang bushou*)" (Ji 1988:205).[14] As a result, at every temporary end of an inky trajectory, we expect to see a gesture that resembles the collecting of breath after a flurry of action. In this manner, composure is regained and another discharge of energy can be directed to the brush tip without showing the slightest sign of haste. If every stroke is treated as an integrity that possibly leads to another integrity, then the recollecting and withholding of energy at the end of every stroke ensures a fully prepared start for the ensuing one. In other words, the relatively abrupt halts in calligraphic forms predict the extension of energy.

On another level, the principle of withholding does not only apply to the ending of brush strokes. As an important organizing principle of force, it ensures that the gesture of force is well rounded up, so that no protruding edges of its power are left on the page. What most calligraphers in their artistic maturity despise is untamed energy flowing wild in characters (Chen 1993:137). The sharp edges, crooks and turns surge on the paper like hundreds of unsheathed swords fling fanatically on a battlefield. Sheer showmanship is

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[14] The sentence comes from Mi Fu (1051-1107), a great Song dynasty calligrapher. It is a free translation. Admittedly, it is loaded with my own interpretation, as most translations from classic Chinese to either foreign languages or even contemporary Chinese are. Another more literal translation offered by Chang & Frankel is "Whatever hangs down must turn upward; whenever one goes, one must turn back" (1995:19).

generally discouraged on the grounds that it lacks the subtle and veil-like beauty of modesty. Though it exhibits strength, at the same time it exposes weakness. A perfect exemplification of the mastery of this calligraphic principle is Tang dynasty calligrapher, Yan Zhenqing (709-785). His calligraphy is said to epitomize the "sinew (*jin*)" quality of the calligraphic physiognomy (Fig. 4.1). In his sinewy brush strokes, we can see the resplendence of energy attired in supreme composure.

Fig. 4.1 Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy displays a quality of sinew (*jin*).

C. *Sluggishness* (*Liu*)

Liu, in Chinese, means staying or being kept at the same place. In calligraphy, it implies constant checking as the brush moves along. It is almost a reluctance to move forward. Here emerges another paradox - intending to move forward while refusing to do so! Once again, through paradox an aesthetic tenet is expressed. Bao Shichen, a calligraphy theorist (1775-1855), remarked on the nature of this dialectical use of brush. Having studied the stelae of calligraphy of the Six Dynasties closely, he concluded that the ancient masters checked and dragged their brushes whenever they thought they were inclined to glide smoothly, lest the stokes became too flippant (*xingchu jieliu; liuchu jiexing*) (Bao Shichen,

Yizhou shuangji, in *Lidai* 1980:646). A result of the technique is *zhanxing* (lit. to walk with constant tremors, or to walk as if in the middle of a battle). It refers to an almost trembling effect of brush strokes. There are two *zhan* characters with the same pronunciation, that can be used in this term. One of them means to battle, and the other one, to tremble. The second character in the term, *xing*, means to move at a walking pace. The term formed by these two characters' connotations is one of moving forward as if battling against some invisible force. It is as if one was confronting a grave danger or enemy that one has to check cautiously at every step. The outward impression is one of insuperable inertia - therefore the 'trembling effect', as if all energy was spent on refusing to move; although, ultimately, the brush has to move forward in order to write anything. To calligraphers, this tactic is used to ensure a balanced distribution of strength on every part of the stroke, and to be certain that each sub-element of it receives the full attention of the calligrapher at the moment of writing. The sluggishness in execution is a price paid for well-tended parts. It is a result of the of force in execution under total control, which also guarantees that no hint of slipperiness or flippancy can sabotage the overall finish.

This is what practising calligraphers would say. But it is not how non-calligraphers, without the same enthusiasm, would describe calligraphy. In fact, my informant Lan, though with plenty of experience in wielding the brush when growing up, told me that she did not know what all this force exercise meant. This lack of calligraphic knowledge among people outside the calligraphic circle will prove to be of significant importance as the thesis develops. I will return to this point later.

After stressing the importance of the three characteristics of force, it is important to point out that they only provide the antithesis of an intuitive vision of force in calligraphic strokes. In other words, they are not expected to replace the thesis, i.e., everything that is linked to moving the brush smoothly forward. Without the brush moving forward, no calligraphic work can possibly be produced in the first place. On account of this, the three principles serve to highlight the subtle counter-intuitive execution of forces that is vital to the expressive richness of brush strokes. They constitute the figure of the whole picture. Behind them lies the ground, without which no figure can take shape. Reverting to Sun Guoting's paragraph on speed-swiftness and lingering-slowness. Speed-swiftness is the result of the free-flowing of brush strokes, the natural momentum of which is forward. However,

the three counter-forces constantly put this unhesitant flow in check, which generates a backward or halting momentum, i.e., what Sun called lingering-slowness. According to Sun, the ultimate perfection of calligraphy lies in the balance of speed and lingering. This balance, as I have tried to show, is achieved by the mastery of the force and counter-force at the brush tip during the execution. In other words, it is only through the mastery of both force and counter-force (summarised by the three characteristics of force) that one is allowed to enter the world of consummate calligraphic beauty.

4.1.6 Physical Force and Graphic Energy

All the play of force and counter-force is devoted to a single goal - to imbue inked brush strokes with the rhythm and substance of life. Now the question remains: How is this achieved? As mentioned earlier, the visual dynamic of forms is often created by corresponding physical forces. Though Arheim rightly argued that works of art are seldom produced physically by the forces perceived in their shapes, I do not think this applies to Chinese calligraphy. The concept of 'graphic energy' or 'visual dynamics' in Chinese calligraphy can only be fully understood in the use of force in wielding the brush. It may help to point out that once a stroke is written, it is forbidden to retouch it with the brush. Once ink leaves a mark on the paper, its destiny is finalized. Therefore, a written work can be seen as a succession of brush strokes of no return. Once an inked stroked is written, it cannot be scraped off, erased, written over or modified in any way. This strict interdiction against retouching makes the graphic form of Chinese calligraphy a live high-fidelity record of the physical forces involved in the brush play. The inky characters become lifelike because they are the crystallization of the vibrant or subdued forces of the calligrapher, transmitted through the brush tip. The motor act, in Chinese calligraphy, leaves an imprint on the produced form. That is why, to fully appreciate the beauty of Chinese calligraphy, an adept has to envision a mental brush tracing through the ink strokes, following every twist and turn suggested by the form itself. To a Chinese calligrapher, only by reconstructing the process of execution in one's mind can one enter the flow of energy that gives birth to the work. It is also the only way through the mirror of static images into the secluded realm of living exuberance and vitality of the actual 'doing' of calligraphy.[15]

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[15] Ledderose (1986) sees the retracing of calligraphic trajectory in the appreciation of past masters' work as "being together in inked traces" with the master. The concept is similar to what Alfred Schutz (1967) calls "making music together". In other words, the 're-doing' allows the time dimension to warp and brings the writer of the original work in touch with the 'reader'.

4.2 The Composition of Calligraphy

4.2.1 Non-geometrical Form and Cultural Evaluation

I now move the spotlight to the second pillar of the art of Chinese calligraphy - composition (*zhangfa*). The first thing to point out about composition is: No constituent stroke in calligraphy is geometrical. Stark geometry is unswervingly disfavoured - a result of the respect for the intrinsic characteristics of the writing tool on the one hand; and a contempt for reproducible forms in the realm of calligraphy on the other. As Willetts sums up, "[T]he good brush-stroke is essentially irregular, and this irregularity lies not only in the inevitable modulation of line and texture brought about by varying degrees of pressure of the brush tip, but can be seen also in the relative massivity or slenderness of individual strokes, in the curves described by their axes, and in the direction in which they fall onto the paper; horizontals and verticals, for instance, rarely lie in a strict horizontal or vertical plane. The brush-stroke, in fact, should imitate the dynamic asymmetry of the forms of nature" (Willetts 1958:579).[16] Ideal calligraphic strokes are formed in line with the technical makeup of the brush. In awe of the expressive power of the tool, Chinese calligraphers have never attempted a transgression into regularity and neatness, because the brush is not made for that purpose. Firstly, the brush is extremely supple and the position in which the brush is held demands a very precise and disciplined hand movement. Moreover, the absorbent off-white rice paper, sometimes silk, tends to register any inked trace with alacrity. These reasons, together with the interdiction against retouching, makes it virtually impossible to write two identical characters.[17]

Though strokes are not geometric, they are by no means irregular. Among the wide

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[16] Similar preference for irregularity in art can also be found in Japan. "A reverence for nature went with the awareness that the shape of things is due to organic growth and that it was desirable therefore to retain the signs of the making in craft work... Yanagi (leader of Japanese *mingei*, a folk craft movement) insists that this is the decisive reason for the preference for "irregularity" in Japanese art, and he points to its derivation from the Buddhist belief that the things of our world are not constant and stable but impermanent flux of coming and going... The Western preference for perfect and final shape derives, according to Yanagi, from the tradition of Greek rationalism, which resulted finally in our industrial machines. By its very nature the machine product displays perfect shape and symmetry, but the finality of such perfection disavows human nature as living, growing and changing."(Arnheim 1996:37-8)

[17] This, however, coexists with the goal of reproducing (by copying) the model work in the learning process (chapter 5). The reader will soon realise that the world of calligraphy is replete with paradoxes. In a sense, to 'enter' the world of Chinese calligraphy intellectually is to enter a web of paradoxes. This is perhaps one of its charms as a theoretical subject.

varieties of every stroke, calligraphers have picked out the forms that demand most brush control and hand movement to be the paragons, and have rejected others as defective. Throughout the history of Chinese calligraphy, tomes of work have been devoted to theorizing and evaluating these strokes. The reason seems, to me, to lie in their non-geometrical quality. If calligraphic strokes abided to the rather rigid rules of geometry, there perhaps would not have been much room for discussion and theorization on the quality of strokes. After all, calligraphic strokes do not contain the dimensions of hue or colour, even though the inking is not as monochrome as it appears to untrained eyes. It is their regular-but-not-quite-so-regular quality of form (good vs. bad strokes) that absorbs all the evaluation. For instance, a dot-stroke (*dian*) is regarded as defective if it has knotty look, sharp edges, a concave abdomen, or if it resembles an ox head (Fig. 4.2). A horizontal line (*heng*) is also defective if it has an unduly large and knotty beginning, or if its beginning and ending look like broken branches. These are all examples of ill-controlled force in the lifting and pressing of the brush tip. It is precisely here that cultural values affect the assessment of calligraphic forms. Composure, smoothness, withholding of power, roundedness and fullness all manage to sneak into the evaluation of calligraphic strokes. As we will see soon, the pervasive 'cultural significance' also affects brush techniques, the composition of individual characters and the composition of the whole work.

4.2.2 Compositional Principles of Individual Characters

Jieti (or *jiezi*), literally meaning the linking of units or holding the body together, is the calligraphic equivalent for the English term 'composition' for individual characters. Several theoretical systems of composition principles have been developed over the years. All of them share one prerequisite: inscribing the character within an imaginary square and centring it. While the imaginary square provides an external frame for Chinese characters; centring all component units of a character gives it a perceptual centre of gravity. This is the focus of energy of a character. This central point can lie on either the figure or the ground, but preferably it is located in the central segment (*zhonggong*) of the imaginary nine-fold square (*jiugong ge*) that circumscribes the whole character (Bao Shichen, *Yizhou shuangji*) (Fig. 4.3). Some basic information on *jieti* should be given at this stage to help the reader understand the graphic makeup of Chinese characters. The majority of Chinese characters are composed of more than one element. Each element can exist on its own as an individual character. This means that each character is in a constant danger of disintegrating into

alternative combinations of meaningful parts. Therefore, the first prerequisite of a clear and legible handwriting is to keep the parts of a character within a visual unity and to make sure that parts from different characters do not establish liaisons that will undermine this unity. In order to create bonds among the elements within a character, and avoid disintegration, the first step is to assign hierarchy to the elements. The autonomy of the component elements within a character is sacrificed to create overall autonomy for the whole character. As Willetts points out, "[There is a] conception of the character as an organic whole, whose parts are not arbitrarily juxtaposed but are integrated into a system of internal tensions, movements, and exchanges of energy, like those of a living being" (Willetts 1958:580). Here is a brief summary of these rules (cf. Chiang 1954:172-188; Billeter 1990:28-33, etc.)[18]

Fig. 4.3 Character by Zhao Meng-fu in ninefold square (*jiugong ge*).

[18] Different systems of compositional rules have been developed based on these prerequisites. Generally speaking, they are all devoted to the establishment of intra-character bonds between parts. Although they were originally designed for the regular script that reached its full bloom in Tang dynasty, most of them apply to other scripts as well.

A. Order with Local Variation

Firstly, the constituent parts of a character must be arranged in an orderly, but not rigid fashion. Characters are very varied in shape and density. It is important to make sure that the spaces among the elements are evenly distributed so that no part appears crushed, overcrowded, or drifting astray. However, while distributing the space evenly, one cannot sacrifice the liveliness of each stroke. When there are repetitive elements in a character, it is important to give each a touch of variance according to the difference in location. Monotonous repetition is strongly disfavoured.

B. Modification for Integration

Secondly, each element is modified, in size, shape and density, in order to be integrated into the whole character. How it is modified depends on its location in the character. This rule makes it clear that a character is an organic whole. It is precisely through this continual modification according to the locality of constituent elements that bonds between the parts and the whole are created. Let's look at Fig. 4.4 for illustration.

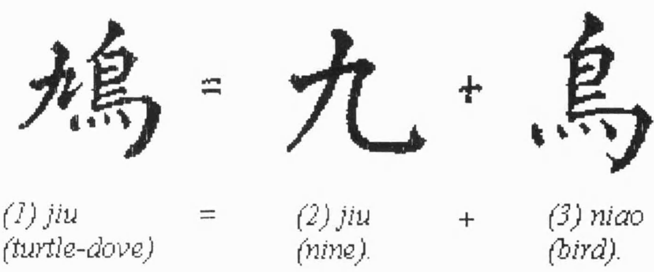

Fig. 4.4 Modification for integration in calligraphic composition.

The first character *jiu* (turtle-dove) (1) is composed of two elements: *jiu* (nine) (2) on the left and *niao* (bird) (3) on the right. The shape and size of the character 'nine' is obviously modified to adapt to its location in the character 'turtle-dove'. By doing so, it also gives up its autonomy as an individual character to the more dominant element 'bird'. Though being the dominant element, 'bird' in 'turtle-dove' also needs to alter its shape slightly. This is a good example of the interdependence of component elements within a character. The principle is this: When elements are placed together to form a unity, they are obliged to adapt to and accommodate each other for the sake of overall balance. Though succumbing their individual autonomy to the harmony of the whole, component elements

should always retain their respective beauty of form. The complexity of this balancing process is easily detected in the writing of young children and foreigners who try to learn Chinese characters. Similar lack of control can be seen in children's drawing (Fig. 4.5). In the process of writing, the subtle balancing of parts and whole becomes a totally spontaneous act. Besides, given the infinitely variable thickness of strokes, which undoubtably affects the graphic balance, balancing is even more challenging than it may appear.

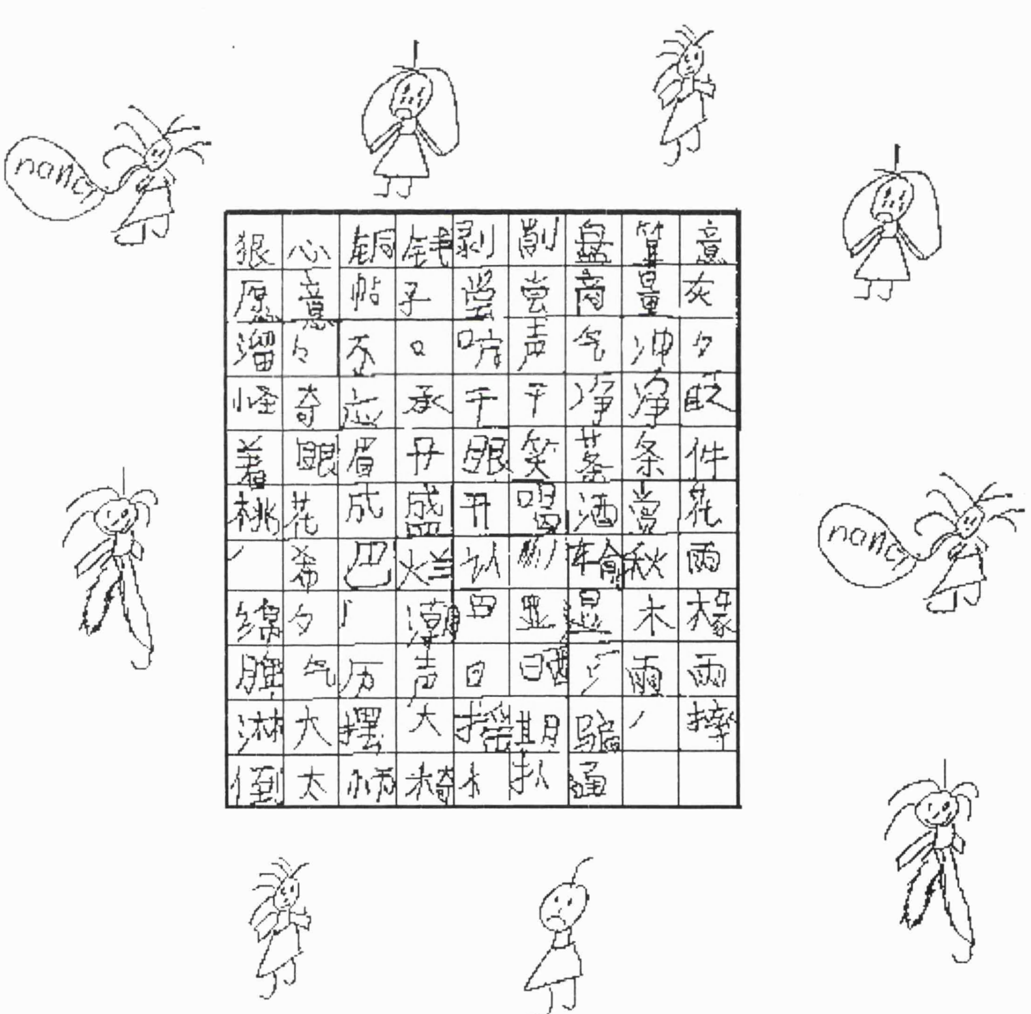

Fig. 4.5 Children's handwriting and drawing.

C. Continuation of Energy

Thirdly, the energy flow should not be impeded in the process of writing. Although this sounds like an abstract rule, it's effect can nevertheless be detected in the way

consecutive strokes respond to each other in visible forms. For example, in characters that consist of two, three or four dots, these dots always appear as unmistakable sets rather than unrelated strokes. Let's have a look at Fig. 4.6 to see how this is done in different scripts. The four dots at the bottom of character *wu* (nothingness) start with the left one, proceeding through the middle two, then finally ends at the right. The first dot tilts as if it was calling and waiting for a response. The middle two answer and we can tell from the relatively light press of the brush that they are in the middle of movement, heading for some other destination. Then the final dot shows the determination and weight of a point of completion. The implied connection is marked out by the dotted line. The connection between strokes becomes very clear in running and cursive scripts. For characters without such an obvious set of strokes, the relation of tossing-and-catching still exists.

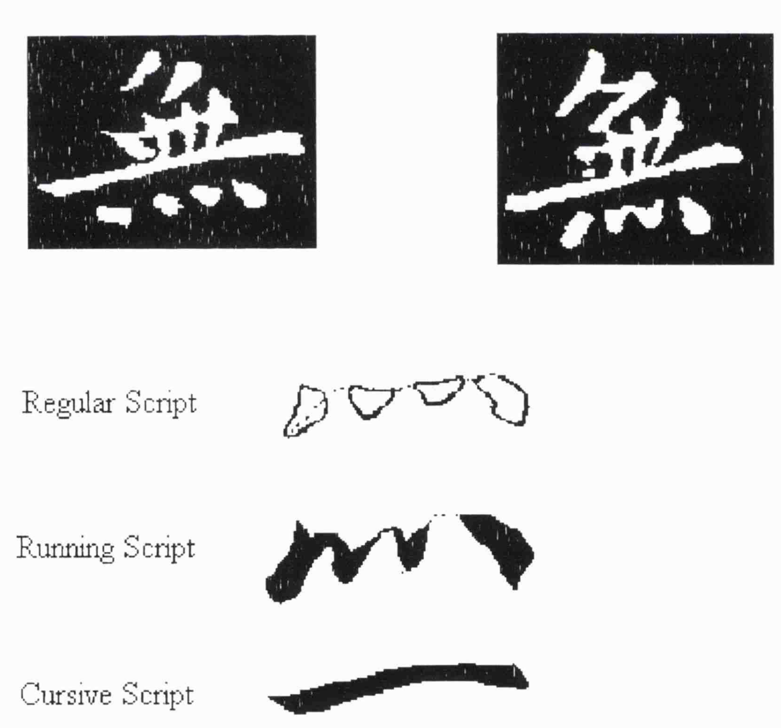

Fig. 4.6 The continuous flow of energy becomes more and more obvious in form, from regular to running, then cursive script.

The continuity is established by the uninterrupted rhythm that carries the brush tip forward. This continuity is sometimes expressed in a visible way, but is mostly intangible. As a logical result of the continuation, later written characters should also adapt themselves to the layout and momentum of previously written ones. In this manner, the writing of a whole piece of work becomes a continual judging and adjusting process, striving for the wholeness of image and impression.

D. Straying Away from Convention to Please the Eye

The last principle is that calligraphers are often willing to improvise changes to the shape of characters in pursuit of beauty of form. That is to say, they sometimes write characters in a different way from what is prescribed by convention. This is rather astonishing. Imagine someone spelling an English word differently just to make it more appealing to the eye! One may argue that any change of spelling runs the risk of poor intelligibility; but in fact Chinese writing is still perfectly legible when one or two strokes are missed out. I have come across a Chinese advertisement poster with part of every character blocked out to convey the message of partial truth, referring to the partiality of media-style facts. But the message is certainly understood without problem (Fig. 4.7). Nevertheless, I am not content with an explanation based on the quintessential difference between the two written languages. A better explanation is this: Chinese calligraphers do not always pay attention to the content of beautiful handwriting. For many, it is an indescribable pleasure simply looking at the dancing brush strokes regardless of what the calligrapher is trying to say through the content of his writing. Wrongly written characters (*biezi*) are leniently tolerated as long as the calligraphy itself is good. Lin Yutang's article *The Artistic Life* in his book *My Country and My People*[19] comments on this preoccupation of form.

> "It seems to me that calligraphy, as representing the purest principles of rhythm and composition, stands in relation to painting as pure mathematics stands in relation to engineering or astronomy. In appreciating Chinese calligraphy, the meaning is entirely forgotten, and the lines and forms are appreciated in and for themselves. In this cultivation and appreciation of pure witchery of line and beauty of composition, therefore, the Chinese have absolute freedom and entire devotion to pure form as such, as apart from content. A painting has to convey an object, but a well-written character conveys only its own beauty of line and structure" (Lin 1939:276; for the

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[19] It is regarded by many, including myself and many professional calligraphers I talked to in the field, as one of the most inspiring essays on the appreciation of Chinese calligraphy by modern writers.

Chinese version, see Lin 1980:268).

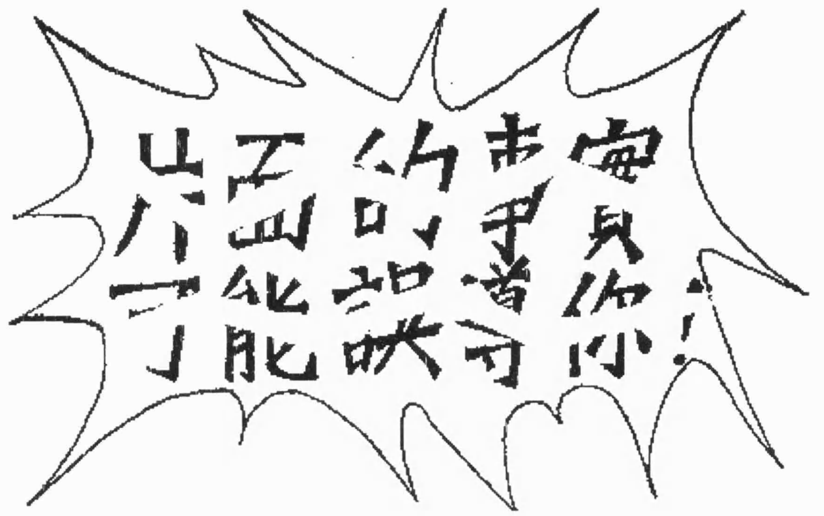

Fig. 4.7 Partial facts can be misleading!

The desire for communication through content is often, although not always, reduced to the minimum. In fact, most calligraphic work is hand-copied texts from existing literary sources, such as classic Tang or Song poems or Mao's poems in the PRC. In this sense, Chinese calligraphy has ceased to be writing in the sense of a means of communication.

However, this preoccupation with form and rhythm of lines (*xiantiao*), regardless of the content of the language, is not shared by all Chinese. This is best exemplified by the reaction of Chinese museum goers, examining a display of exquisitely beautiful calligraphic work by ancient masters in cursive style (often unintelligible to the uninitiated).[20] Their most common comments are: "Can you read it?", "What does it say?", "It's like talismanic writing by a ghost [*gui hua fu*, meaning scrawly and unintelligible writing]. I don't understand what he writes [*kanbudong*. How can a mundane understand the writing of ghost or spirit?]". Similarly, responses by non-calligraphers, when shown a piece of calligraphic work, are: "I cannot read what he writes." or "The writing looks good (*zi haokan*), but I can't read it (*danshi wo kanbudong*)". People also often express their sense of amazement by saying "How did he write this? Too astonishing (*tai lihai*)!"[21] Presented with a piece of calligraphic

[20] Observations conducted in The Palace Museum in Taipei and Calligraphy Exhibitions in the British Museum.

[21] This point will be discussed further in chapter 7.

work, the first reaction of a Chinese unacquainted with the aesthetic discourse of calligraphy, is to attempt to read the content of the writing. This is confirmed by Bayne by his observation in Hangzhou, a city on the prosperous east coast of China.

> "Calligraphers were quick to point out to me that for those unversed in calligraphy, what was normally privileged was visual comprehension. Discussing brush and ink calligraphy with Chen, an art professor from the art academy in Hangzhou, I was told that "people don't like *caoshu* (cursive style) and *zhuanshu* (seal style) because they can't read the characters" - these being the most abstract (in the case of cursive script) or archaic of Chinese calligraphic scripts. Speaking to non-artists seemed to bear this out, a majority being of the opinion that the measure of a calligraphic passage depended on its legibility and not so much on the execution and composition of the Chinese characters on the page" (Bayne 1998:167).

To people who are not introduced to the 'wonder' of calligraphy, calligraphy is first of all an attempt at communication. This explains why legibility is their main concern when seeing a piece of calligraphic work.

So far, one might get the impression that by prioritizing the form and rhythm of calligraphy over its content, Lin Yutang is recapitulating an elitist myth. However, such scepticism is only partially true. The desire for legibility by a non-calligraphic-adept should not be taken too far. To like or dislike a piece of artwork, I suggest, has a lot to do with the establishment of personal connections of various kinds with the work. For this reason, legibility is the most likely connection to seize for people unfamiliar with calligraphy appreciation tradition (brush techniques and composition for instance). It is natural enough that, when presented with something that is <u>meant to be appreciated</u> such as calligraphy or painting (or any other work in the museum or gallery, most of which are presented as things to be appreciated), they tend to lean on this common resource. However, this desire for legibility alone is not sufficient to render Lin's statement invalid, because it can just as easily be interpreted as nothing but a rational choice when no alternatives are available. Lin's way of appreciating calligraphy achieves a visual comprehension based on the accumulated knowledge of graphic form and rhythm in rendering. By contrast, what Bayne calls "the majority of non-artists" achieve another type of visual comprehension based on legibility of written characters.[22]

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[22] One can also attribute this difference in appreciation to different degrees of access to the 'deep meanings' of written characters (chapter 2).

4.2.3 Theme and Variation

All four principles discussed above are elegantly summarised by Jiang Kui in *Sequel to the Treatise on Calligraphy* (*xu shupu*):

> "The form of each character may undergo numerous changes as a result of corresponding starts and responses. A certain start calls for a certain response, each following its own rationale. Among the characters written by Wang Xizhi, the ones with highest appearance rate are *xizhi* (his name), *dang* (ought to), *de* (to obtain) and *wei* (to console). Each of the characters appeared several dozen times, but no two of them are identical. In spite of the individual difference, one can still detect easily the family resemblance between them. One may say that he was able to 'follow his heart's desire without offending against propriety" (translated in Chang & Frankle 1995:20).

As we have seen, compositional principles mostly deal with the interaction between strokes and characters. At the pinnacle of mastery, the spontaneous realization of these interactive rules is precipitated into dozens of variations of a single character. Each variation is a local elaboration of a common theme, in accord with the local textual ambience. No character or stroke stands alone on paper. Each is situated on a web of calls and responses, actions and reactions. For example, in Wang's *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (*Lanting jixu*), the character *zhi* (a preposition, meaning 'of') appears twenty times, each of them distinct from others (Fig. 4.8). The work of the 'Saint of Calligraphy', Wang Xizhi, represents the summit of the 'variation form' in Chinese calligraphy, just as Bach's Goldberg Variations is the apotheosis of the 'variation form' in Western classical music.

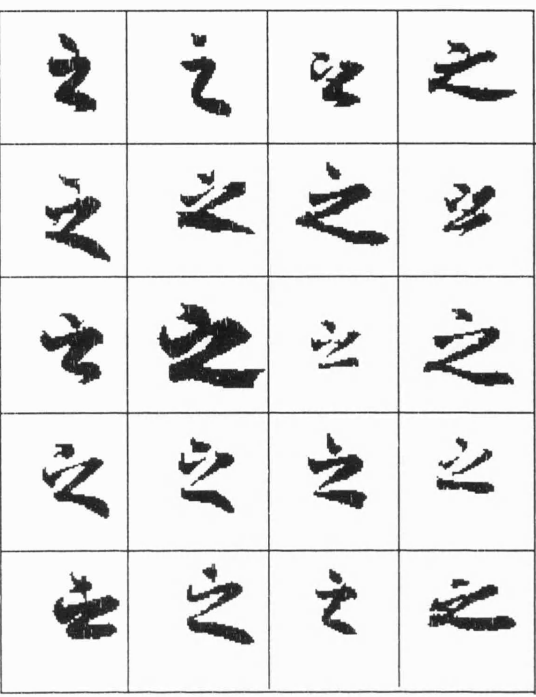

Fig. 4.8 Variations on the character *zhi* in Wang Xizhi's *Orchid Pavilion Preface*.

4.2.4 Rule of Anti-rules: Writing as an Impromptu Sequence of Action and Reaction

Interestingly, embedded within these rules is a co-existent antipathy against them. Compositional rules, in calligraphy theorist Sun Guoting's (and many others') understanding, have to be superseded eventually.

> "When tracing parallel bars, give each of them a different stance; when aligning dots, give them varied poses. A single dot determines the outline of the whole character, and a single character sets the standard for the whole piece. So that all the elements are opposed without jarring and match without looking alike... Do not bother with set-square or compass while making curves and crooks; decline patterns and rules when writing straight and curved strokes. Alternate apparent and hidden attacks (beginning of a stroke), developments and vertical movements. Draw from your brush an infinity of metamorphoses and entrust all the emotions to the forms emerging on the paper. Let there be no divergence between your mind and hand; and forget all the rules. Then, above and beyond convention, you can unfalteringly turn your back on the greatest masters and do wonders, even by going against them." (Sun Guoting, *Shupu,* in *Lidai*, 130-131)

It seems that these rules exist only to be dispensed with at a later stage. The fluidity of rules contributes to their ensuing abandonment. They are, in a word, all about how to achieve overall harmony between the postures of calligraphic strokes. Besides, the strict interdiction against retouching makes the arrangement of a composition an impromptu (*suiji*) act. A *suiji* act is an act that is quickly taken to adapt to the circumstances. In other words, each brush stroke is arranged, taking the existing configuration of ink traces into consideration, so as to achieve a desired overall effect. Although the term 'arranged' is used here, it does not mean that serious thought is involved in its committal. Instead, each stroke is executed swiftly and no delay is allowed between thinking and execution. As a consequence, each brush stroke appears to be automatic. This is when there is no divergence between mind and hand (*xinshou xiangsui*, lit. the heart-mind and the hand follow each other closely). All talk about composition is nothing but afterthought. In the process of execution, there is no negotiation between planning and acting. In this respect, an accomplished calligrapher's brush strokes flow in a manner similar to the experienced driver's negotiation of a chaotic stream of traffic. After years and years of practice, all decisions are based on instinct - act and ensuing responses naturally mesh tightly with each other. In other words, although compositional rules form the foundations of the art of calligraphy, they also call for their self-denial.

4.2.5 Calligraphic Composition of the Whole Work

A. Interactivity and Unstable Balance

So far we have concentrated on individual characters. But the same principles apply to the composition of the whole piece of work - *zhangfa*. In fact, the principle of interactivity constitutes the pith of *zhangfa*, and has been experimented in every possible way by centuries of practise on brush play. These experiments can be summed up as a series of destructions and reconstructions of balance - deliberate or accidental imbalance of one character is compensated by the imbalance of another. In this way the unstable balance prevails, and the whole work is simultaneously animated with a constant traversing of space. The question now is: How is this realized in actual work? Let us look at Fig. 4.9 for demonstration.

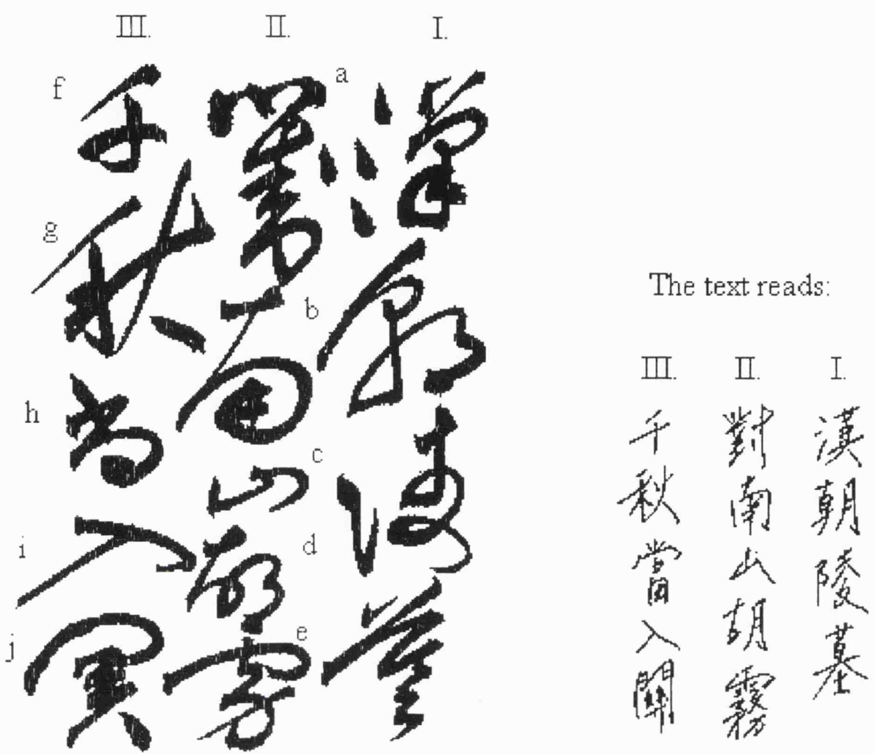

Fig. 4.9 Dynamic balance in calligraphic composition.

In Fig. 4.9[23], in the middle column (II), the top two large and obtrusive characters in a row (*duì* (a), and *nan* (b)) call for the receding of the third character (*shan* (c)). While responding to preceding characters, the tilted character *shan* (c) accidentally destroys the balance by bringing in an up-and-rightward momentum. So later, a balancing momentum is introduced into the array of movements by the fourth character *hu* (d), to shift the weight to the left-hand side of the page. Finally, the fifth character *wu* (e) works as a temporary local respite of the column (II) by diverting the weight further to the right without losing its own balance. The same analysis can be carried on to the left column (III). We can immediately see how the top two characters (*qian* (f), and *qiu* (g)) form a relatively self-contained sub-unit in a kind of unstable balance (small *qian* tucked snugly in the upper-left corner of a much larger *qiu*). The character *dang* (h) proceeded by the exaggerated large *qiu* (g) is constricted to bring the expansion under control. The balance is restored

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[23] I have failed to identify the source of this piece of work. It should be pointed out that as traditional Chinese writing reads from right to left, column after column (within each column, it reads from top to bottom), the sequence of this analysis corresponds to that reading order.

temporarily only to be disturbed once more by another wildly slanting character *ru* (i). Once again the element of imbalance has to be countered and subdued by a relatively steady *guan* (j). While upsetting the rigid order of a line [column (III), the second and the fourth characters *qiu* (g), and *ru* (i)], these unruly characters successfully introduce a dynamic balance to the work.

Two points of interest should be highlighted from the analysis of this example. First, this discussion should be viewed as an extension of the previous discussion on writing as an impromptu sequence of action and reaction. It demonstrates succinctly how the free-flowing action and reaction of brush strokes can be realized in the actual process of execution. What strikes me most about this writing process is the degree of physical performance it involves, although obviously it cannot be understood as either purely physical or purely performative. What appears to be a clever arrangement of two-dimensional graphs is in fact the crystallised vision of a breathtaking exhibition of quick flashes of motorial coordination. If one's adrenaline secretion gets overexcited by watching the lightning-fast hits and turns of a table-tennis ball, the actual trajectory of which is often too fast to be caught by the naked eye, then one should also be stunned by the speed of response displayed by an adept calligrapher. In this respect, writing calligraphy is indeed highly performative, albeit the choreography of the brush dance is not fixed in advance. The point I want to put forward here is this: The training of calligraphy is a motorial one as well as a graphic one. It aims to sharpen and quicken one's reflexes.[24] The graphic accomplishment of calligraphy cannot be explained without bringing to the fore the dexterous motorial achievement that is involved. This point is of significant importance to one of the dominant arguments I want to put forward in this thesis. Therefore it will be a recurring subject in the course of discussion.

Another point concerns the contrast between rigid stability and unstable/dynamic balance. Before burying myself in a discussion on this subject, I would like to quote my retiree calligraphy enthusiast informant. He once showed me a work he was engaged in

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[24] Billeter (1990), in his attempt to capture the importance of the bodily involvement in calligraphy, coined a series of existentialist terms such as *body propre* and *activity propre*, to describe the role of the body in the act of writing calligraphy. However, as many people would readily agree, these notions are unnecessarily vague (Leys 1996). As a result it may actually hinder the understanding and appreciation of the highly illuminating points he tries to put forward in the book. What I try to do here is to offer a more down-to-earth version of Billeter's argument as I understand it, although I certainly do not claim to encompass the entirety of his arguments.

(copying, see chapter 5) at that time. He held a copy of *Zhang Menglong Bei*[25] (Tomb-inscription of Zhang Menglong) in his hand and pointed to some characters, saying,

> "This *zi* was derived from *lishu* (clerical style). These characters are structurally well balanced. Before, I didn't like these characters at all, thinking that they were not *haokan* (pleasing to the eye). But now, I can appreciate how good they are because there is, everywhere, a balance of the centres of gravity among the dots and strokes (*dianhua zhongxin* de *pingheng*). Just look at these characters. Where the strokes are sparse, a horse can run through them; where they are dense, not even the wind can penetrate them (*shu ke paoma, mi bu tongfeng*). This work is very powerful and vigorous (*xiongzhuang*). The strength (or forcefulness) runs through the whole work (*qili guanchan*). Only when you understand the dynamic balance (*dong de pingheng*) can you understand why *Zhang Menglong Bei* is so good. At first sight, it appears to be baring fangs and brandishing claws (*zhangya wuzhua*, meaning to make threatening gestures and engage in sabre rattling). But the characters' centres of gravity are very stable. There is a mutual balance among the strokes (*dianhua huxiang pingheng*)... Generally speaking, delicately pretty (*qingxiu*) *zi* are more popular, such as Zhao Mengfu's[26] *zi*. But to appreciate the *zi* of *Zhang Menglong Bei*, you have to know more about calligraphy. It's not instinctive to like these characters."

The characteristic structural form of *Zhang Menglong Bei*, though it appears to be unbalanced, somehow maintains it overall balance. As suggested by my informant, one has to learn to appreciate the beauty of dynamic balance (*dong de pingheng*). It is not immediately pleasing to the eye. The abrupt local imbalance of the characters can be interpreted as awkwardness or aggression (bearing fangs and brandishing claws). But after careful examination, one realises that these threatening characters are in fact very stable. Though stability (*wen*) and instability (*buwen*) are both seen as attractive in calligraphy,

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[25] *Zhang Menglong Bei* was erected in 522 A.D., during the North Wei dynasty. The inscription describes the merits of Zhang Menglong for his filial piety and his effort in promoting education. The brushwork of this piece of work is characterised by the coexistence of squared and rounded strokes. The style of the work is generally described as incisive, vigorous and straightforward. In the history of Chinese calligraphy, the style typical of North Wei stone inscriptions (*weibei*) is opposed to the mainstream style of elegance, grace and daintiness, represented by Wang Xizhi's legendary work *Orchid Pavilion Preface*. During the Qing dynasty, the calligraphic vogue was dominated by a group of works appearing on stele - the *weibei* style. It was promoted by the literati of the Qing dynasty, such as Kang Youwei. Before then, it was considered inferior to the mainstream style, which is a product of the *shi* [a social stratum in imperial China, characterised by their learning] culture in China, partly because it was written by anonymous Han or pre-Han craftsmen who did not have illustrious background.

[26] Late Song early Yuan dynasty calligrapher/painter (1254-1322). He was regarded as one of the most accomplished calligraphers of all time, renowned for the superior elegance and grace of his regular and running scripts. As a scion of the Southern Song Imperial house, he took service under the alien Mongols in the year of 1286 A.D. and became a great favourite of the Yuan emperor. For this act of betrayal, he was condemned by many Chinese calligraphers and his style deemed as feeble and pretty (*ruanmei*), thought to reflect his defective personality.

instability is generally considered superior, in accord with the Chinese fondness for changeability.[27] "Only when one is willing to take precarious steps in wielding the brush can one achieve the mastery of instability. Exquisiteness comes after the supreme control of instability", wrote calligrapher Zeng Xi (1861-1930) (Ji 1988:297).

However, one should not start to think that instability or disorder *per se* is valued in calligraphy. What is valued, instead, is the control of instability. In other words, instability has to be, ultimately, harmonised within itself. Entropy is directed towards the creation of an order of a different kind. In illustration Fig. 4.9, one can see that elements that disturb the balance are continually introduced (intentionally or unintentionally), then ironed out by other disruptive elements. There is clearly an ongoing process of destruction and re-construction of balance (cf. Yu 1990). It is exactly this constant mischievous stirring that generates the unstable balance (or dynamic balance) of the whole work. By this continual traversing and transgressing of space, the calligrapher intends to animate the inked trace with monitored and contained tension. The result of this is the "beauty of momentum" (Lin 1939:279).

B. The Ground of the Graphic: the Blank (*bai*) *or the Void* (*xu*)

> "A painter cannot treat the interstices between figures as nondescript because the relations between the figures can be understood only if the spaces separating them are as carefully defined as the figures themselves... The negative spaces, as many painters call them, must be given sufficient figural quality to be perceivable in their own right." (Arheim 1974:236)

> "A line drawn on a piece of paper cannot be seen simply as itself. First of all, it is always related to the two-dimensional extent around it. Depending on the range and also the shape of empty environment, the appearance of the line changes. Furthermore, there also seems to be no way of seeing the line strictly on a flat plane. Instead, it is seen as lying in front of, or within, an uninterrupted ground." (Arheim 1974:219)

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[27] To me, this is reminiscent of the famous *Taiji* (lit. meaning the Supreme Ultimate) symbol signifying the unity of Yin and Yang. With its two asymmetrical halves perfectly fitted into a restful circle, it epitomizes the overarching cultural preference for dynamic symmetry and unstable balance that can be applied even in the realm of graphics.

The argument that the appearance of lines changes according to their environment is one of the canons of the understanding of calligraphic composition. Some Chinese calligraphers share with Gestalt psychologists a perceptual sensitivity in the exploration of the figure-ground relation. The problem of composition is approached simultaneously from two angles: figure and ground. In the terminology of calligraphy, the figure is equivalent to *hei* (the black/inked part), and the ground to *bai* (the white/blank part), for characters in black ink are written on white paper. Both parts take an equally active role in the shaping of characters in the eyes of the beholder. In fact, the most quoted canon on the ground of calligraphy is this: "Treat the ground/white the same way as you treat the figure/black (*jibai danghei*)". As one of my calligrapher informants put it,

> "The composition can be looked at from two forms - the black part (*hei*) and the white part (*bai*). The combinations of these two parts are ever changing. In this, you can find one of the basics of calligraphy, that is, though there are rules, at the same time there are no rules (*ji youfa, you wufa*). The part that pleases both the mind and the eye is the white/*bai*. So the Chinese enjoy talking about *liubai* (leaving blank space/white in brush painting)."

However, this recognition of the active role played by the ground (*bai*) was not articulated until the expressive potential of the figure (*hei*) was fully developed. As a result, this recognition was not articulated by calligraphy theorists until the seventeenth century. Qing dynasty calligrapher/painter Da Chongguang (1623-1692) was the first theorist to pay special attention to the role of *bai* in composition. He differentiated two types of *bai*: the neat type (*kuangkuo zhi bai*) and the randomly scattered type (*sanluan zhi bai*) (*Shufá*, in *Lidai*, 561). The former is produced by neat brush strokes (such as the seal and regular scripts); whereas the latter by wild ones (such as cursive script).

All discussion on the composition of calligraphy so far has been about the figure (*hei*) of calligraphy. Now we turn our attention to the ground (*bai*), that is the white paper that's severed into irregular patterns by black ink. Jiang He[28] wrote," Generally speaking, the wonder of the black part of calligraphy is derived from the mastery over the layout of the blank part (*dadi shichu zhi miao, jieyin xuchu er sheng*)" (Ji 1988:292). From the perspective of the psychology of perception, the contrast between the inked and the blank

[28] Qing dynasty calligrapher/painter. His exact date of birth is unknown. The quote is from *Xuehua zalun* (Fragments on Learning How to Paint).

areas, in terms of the tone of the ink and the thickness of the stroke, affects the perceived depth. When the ink is dark and the stroke thick, the black area appears to pop out. By contrast, when the ink is pale and the stroke is thin and frail, the black area tends to sink into the vast whiteness. Therefore, this contrast decides the stability of the visual depth, which in turn affects the perceived vigour of the work. Apart from this, different styles of strokes also cut up the blank space differently (cf. Chen 1993:81-94). In regular script, square-shaped blank dominates; whereas stable and regular circles are commonly found in seal script. The exuberant cursive script is replete with no less buoyantly distributed blanks (Fig. 4.10). This is reminiscent of Da Chongguang's differentiation between the neat *bai* and the randomly scattered *bai*. Put another way, one can say that the personality of the inked lines is loyally echoed by the personality of the corresponding blanks.

The emphasis on the organization of *bai* was also stressed by my Kunming-based calligrapher informant when I asked him to talk about calligraphic composition. He told me,

> "*Bai* (the blank) is the focus of appreciation (*xinshang de zhongdian*). But *hei* (the inked part) is what we can control while writing. *Bai* is not what we have control over while writing. It's exactly because *bai* cannot be controlled that good organization of *bai* is rare. There is the factor of fortuitousness (*ouran*) in it. However, fortuitousness is also a result of inevitability (*biran*).[29] It's the dialectics of void and concreteness (*xu xu shi shi*). It's the same as when *yin* comes to the extreme, *yang* rises and when *yang* comes to the extreme, *yin* rises (*yin ji yang sheng; yang ji yin sheng*). It's the balance between balance (*junheng*) and imbalance (*bu junheng*). If the visual effect is not good, it means that the composition is no good."

Due to his deep interest in Yijing (I Ching), he tends to understand the figure-ground relation from the perspective of the dialectics of the void (*xu*)/*yin* and the concreteness (*shi*)/*yang*. However, this is not peculiar to him alone. In fact, until recently, this was the way most Chinese calligraphers thought about the figure-ground relation. However, contemporary professional calligraphy theorists in China, influenced by the writing of Arheim, have begun to adopt the figure-ground interpretation.[30]

[29] By inevitability, here, he means the accumulated skills in brush manoeuvring and the sharpened sense of two-dimensional spatial organization.

[30] The Chinese translation of Rudolf Arheim's *Art and Visual Perception*, was available in China in 1984, published by *Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe* (The China Social Sciences Publishing Co.) Leading contemporary calligraphy theorists such as Chen (1993) and Qiu (1995) are obviously influenced

According to my calligrapher informant, Chinese calligraphy theorists have never developed theories on the ground-white as rich as those linked to the figure-black. The theoretical anaemia is hardly surprising. Examination of painting, music and opera immediately reveals the fact that the blank is often the focus of rumination. The void, the undifferentiated foil from which the positive message is set off, accommodates imagination and speculation as a sponge soaks up liquid. " Students of calligraphy should derive (*qiu*) general compositional principles (*fadu*) from the part blackened with ink, and derive the mystic connotation (*shenli*) from the blank area; They should meditate (*can*) on the compositional principles from the blank part and meditate on the mystic connotation from the inked part" (*Shuhua chuanxi lu*, in Ji 1988:283), wrote Ming dynasty painter/calligrapher Wang Fu (1362-1416). Notice that different verbs are used for the two processes of understanding the rationales of *bai*. Firstly, the rationales can be differentiated into concrete compositional principles (*fadu*) and mystic connotation (*shenli*). Secondly, there are two different processes to approach the rationales - deriving (*qiu*) and contemplating/meditating (*can*). *Qiu* is a process associated with logic and reason, implying a direct link. By contrast, *can*, a term used by Chan Buddhism, is a process of understanding that which can be achieved only with the help of sudden spiritual enlightenment, implying an indirect link. Since what we are interested in here is the *bai* area, let us see how the different rationales and processes of approaching are matched when *bai* area is in consideration. The mystic connotation can be derived (*qiu*) from *bai*; whereas concrete compositional principles can only be contemplated/meditated (*can*) from the same *bai* area. In other words, a direct link (through *qiu*) can be established between *bai* and mystic connotation; whereas an indirect link (through *can*) between *bai* and concrete rules. It seems that, for Wang and very likely for many others, the blank/*bai* belongs to the unspeakable mystic zone since there is a direct link between the two. This is also attested to by my calligrapher informant's comment that good organization of *bai* is not under the calligrapher's control.

While the problem of figure and ground is dealt with by Gestalt psychologists in the West, the fascination with void (*xu*) as a general concept in Chinese culture has its origin in Daoism. It is almost unimaginable that any calligrapher can manage to organize both the inked strokes and the distribution of blank in the swift process of execution. The degree of

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by Arheim's work.

difficulty can be appreciated simply by looking at Escher's work (Fig. 4.11).[31] To give the ground (the negative space) sufficient figure quality so that it is perceivable in its own right is not an easy task even when one can plan in advance and alter afterwards, not to mention when the whole process of production is done swiftly and any change is forbidden, as in the case of Chinese calligraphy.

Fig. 4.11 M. C. Escher: counterchange of fish and frog.

Given the lack of theory on how the blank is organized, one is inclined to think that the doctrine of "Treating the blank the same way as treating the inked strokes" is nothing more than an extension of the intellectual contemplation of the possibility of void (*kong* or *xu*) in general. In my opinion, it is more likely to be an arena of intellectual play than technical guidance. This speculation is attested to by the abundance of philosophical theorisation centring around the notion of *kongbai* (blank space) in Chinese painting. Fascination with the possibility of void/*kong* can also be seen in the physical layout in traditional Chinese architecture, the format of novels (*zhanghui xiaoshuo*)[32], stage opera,

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[31] Similar astounding complexity is found in M. C. Escher's countercharge pattern designs. This example gives one some clue to the degree of difficulty - "How can the artist think of the positive shape of his repeat motif, and yet so shape it that the void created by the boundaries results in a different repeat motif which also represents an animal" in this case (Gombrich 1984:89).

[32] A type of traditional Chinese novel where each chapter is headed by a couplet giving the gist of its content. Each chapter tells a story that can be viewed as a whole on its own right, yet also meshes into the whole novel as an organic part. Some of the chapters can be separated from the rest. One example is the famous story of Pan Jinlian and Wu Song, as constituent chapters in *Shuihu zhuan* (Legends of Heroes on the Water Margins, or All Men Are Brothers), is told in its expanded version in *Jinping mei* (The Golden Lotus).

and traditional Chinese *guqin* music. In all these art forms, *kongbai* can be identified and interpreted from a philosophical perspective. An excellent example can be found in Jiang Xun's *Time and Space in Chinese Art: Infinity and Unfinishedness*. He argues that *kongbai*, so pervasive in both the content and format of Chinese art, can be understood as the deep understanding of the infinity of time and space suggested by the work itself. It points at the spatial and temporal dimension that lies beyond, which is seen as the real condition of human existence. The *kongbai* in Chinese brush painting can also be seen as a warning against totally yielding to the sensory and sensual immersion that can happen while appreciating art. By doing so, it opens up a space for philosophical contemplation that leads to transcendence.

4.3 The Moral Brush

Calligraphic techniques are infused with moral flavour. In this section, I shall use material discussed in this chapter - brush techniques and calligraphic composition - to show how moral preferences leave their imprints on the technical principles of calligraphy.

My calligrapher informant passionately believes in the relationship between calligraphy, as well as many other activities, and Chinese philosophy. He thinks that this is highlighted in brush techniques.

> "Brush Manoeuvre (*yongbi*) and the attacks of brush strokes [*xiabi*, beginning the brush stroke] are all related to ideas in classical Chinese philosophy. For example, why do we stress the importance of *nifeng xiabi* [reverse-tip attack, that is to begin the stroke with the brush tip going in the opposite direction to that expected]? It's because of the doctrine of the mean (*zhongyong zhi dao*). If you want to go forward, you must go backwards first (*yujing xiantui*). Besides, the reason why there is the rule of '*wuwang bushou*' [no horizontal lines are supposed to come to a complete halt without the brush movement being totally gathered and energy flow withheld again] is because we stress that one should not go to extremes (*bu zodao jiduan*)."

According to him, to make the brush work in the opposite direction to that expected is the middle path - not yielding to extremes - embodied in brush techniques. In the context of the three characteristics of force in brush technique, inversion (*ni*) is basically to hold the brush

in a way that it seems to go against the direction of the movement of the produced stroke. Withholding (*xu*) is to collect the momentum of brush movement at the end of each stroke; and sluggishness (*liu*) means a constant reluctance to move the brush forward. Their main purpose is to make sure that the gesture of force is well rounded, so that no protruding edges of its power are left in glaring display on the page. In other words, they aim to curb the unrestrained exhibition of force in case it becomes too blatant and showy. It is to transform the eruptive outpouring of energy into a kind of fully controlled reservoir of power. What is disparaged most by calligraphers in maturity is untamed energy pulsating wild in inked strokes. Control is valued more than sheer showmanship, which is believed to leak from sharp edges and lines that glide unchecked on paper. All measures are taken to ensure that the brush does not display signs of flippancy or shallowness. The middle way is followed with the power of control and the control of power. Once you allow one force to go to the extreme, control is lost. Therefore, you always need to hold it in check with a counteractive force, either the beginning of the stroke (*xiabi*) or its proceeding (*xingbi*). In the examples drawn in the above quote, the reverse tip attack (*nifeng*) begins the stroke with the brush tip going in the opposite direction to that expected. Similarly, while the brush proceeds, there is a constant counterbalance between *wang* (going towards) and *shou* (gathering it back), and between *jing* (moving forward) and *tui* (moving backward). Interestingly, the standard sequence of brush manoeuvres for different strokes are also made into rhythmical pithy formulae (*koujue*, see chapter 5) to be recited by pupils in calligraphy classes.

Another important aspect of brush technique is linked to how the tip of brush is handled while it leaves traces on paper. The predominant preference of hidden brush tip (*cangfeng*)[33] over exposed brush tip (*loufeng*) is well established in the history of calligraphy. *Cangfeng* is a brush technique in which the brush tip is buried in the middle of the area where the brush is in contact with paper. The result is rounded edges, attacks and endings of a brush strokes. In contrast, *loufeng* exposes the brush tip. As a result, angular or sharp forms are produced. But how is the difference between these two brush techniques conceived by calligraphers? Here are some examples from existing literature.

[33] *Feng* literally means blade, because an uncontrolled brush tip naturally produces blade-like graphic form at the attack and the ending of a stroke.

> "Stability and balance is desirable in writing... The first requirement is to have the bone structure of strokes erected and to disguise the *feng* [brush tip]. It is necessary to manoeuvre the brush tip so that it creates the effect of rounded vigour and serene depth. Do not expose the tip and appear shallow and flippant." (Wang Xizhi, in Ji 1988:199)

> "Ancient masters' writing usually adopts hidden-tip technique, which explains the vibrant sense of strength displayed in their work.... To use exposed tip to create a beautiful effect that appeals to the eye is a taboo of calligraphy."(Chen You, *Fuxuan yelu*, quoted in Chen 1993:146)

> "Hide the brush tip so that your writing shows composure and aplomb. The strokes will also be powerful as if they were about to penetrate the paper."(Chu Suiliang (596-658), Tang Dynasty high-ranking official and distinguished calligrapher. In Ji 1988:200)

These ideas about hidden brush tip are still shared by most calligraphy enthusiasts. My informant, a retired chief editor of an official journal, showed me his first piece of calligraphic work and told me,

> "I wrote this before I went to the class three years ago.[34] When the teacher saw it, he said that it was no good. Even though the characters look rather good (*man haokan*), it's not a successful piece of work. My teacher said that none of the strokes employed hidden brush tips. This means that the writer does not have high moral quality (*mei xiuyang*). It's very shallow (*fuqian*) and without depth (*meiyou shendu*), neither does it show any strength (*lidu*) either. The teacher told me that there were only a few successful strokes in the whole work. [He brought out more works he had just written a few days before the interview and showed them to me.] Look at my present work. There is hidden brush tip (*cangfeng*) as well as strength (*youli*). I've made a lot of progress since."

Exposed tip is regarded as shallow, flippant, superficial and vulgar. Though it may look beautiful, it is seen as empty. In contrast, hidden-tip technique is unanimously associated with depth, roundedness, fullness, composure, control and power.[35] demonstrably, preference in brush-tip technique echoes that in the use of force in manoeuvring the brush, and in the diagnosis of the aesthetic quality of calligraphic strokes.

The similarity is too glaring to be mere coincidence. They are indeed reflections of

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[34] Calligraphy classes held at the Retirees' College (*laoren daxue*).

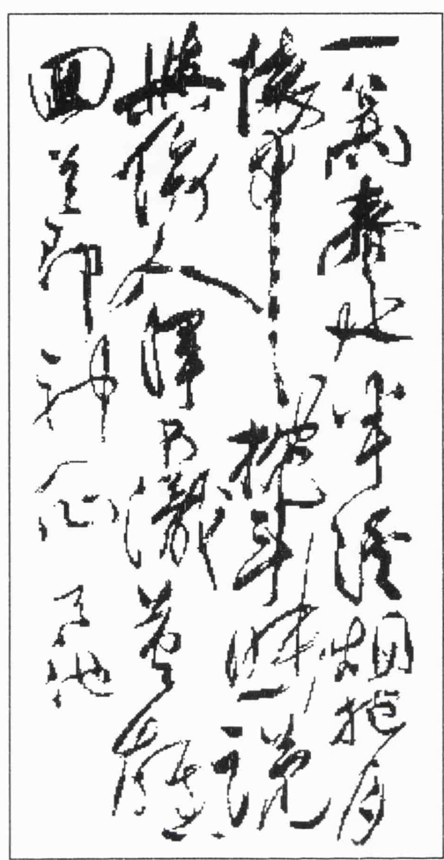
[35] Some, e.g., Jiang Kui in *Sequel to Treaties on Calligraphy*, argue that excessive use of hidden-tip technique generate a sense of stuffiness and lethargy. Nevertheless, hidden-tip is generally agreed to be preferable.

the traditional Chinese idea about the proper bearing of a gentleman (*junzi*), a man with noble character. A person with lofty character should not show off his talents. Talent and strength have to be brewed inside, not blatantly displayed (*junzi cangqi*) - which reveals a lack of depth and modesty. Deliberate flaunting of one's inner wealth and talents runs the risk of attracting malice or ill-intention. It also leads to precocious depletion of such wealth and talents. Strength and ability are perishable, therefore need to be nurtured deep inside and not squandered. In a word, depth and profundity are highly valued qualities, so is the power for self-control and not being easily disconcerted (Chen 1993:147-148). All these desired qualities of a person's moral bearing run deep in the aesthetic judgement of calligraphy. Moreover, hidden-tip technique is associated with the aesthetic quality called "*zhuo* (clumsiness)", as opposed to "*qiao* (cleverness)". "Cleverness" in calligraphy is considered a result of "premeditation in execution" (McNair 1998:49). "Clumsiness", by contrast, "involves letting go of the desire to manipulate the elements of writing in favour of direct expression" (ibid.:49). As discussed in chapter 3, clumsiness, in Confucian ideas, represents the virtue of sincerity and artlessness.

In compositional principles, we can detect another set of moral imprints. These principles embody the idea of continual accommodation and adaptive interactivity. On every level of composition, both intra- and inter-characters, component parts have to continually adapt to others for the sake of overall balance. The rhetoric used to label these principles have an unmistakable social overtone. These inked strokes are talked about as if they were members of a society. For example, the terms "mutual concession (*xiangrang*)" [originally meaning to give way to each other in the social world] and "avoiding & approaching (*bijiu*)" are used to describe the principle that each component element is modified in size, shape and density to be integrated into the whole character. The term "*chaoyi*" [originally meaning that two people face and bow to each other] is used to label a compositional principle implying mutual respect for each other's integrity of form among component parts. Moreover, "tossing and catching (*yinjie*)" [originally meaning to receive guests] is used to label the principle of act-and-response interactivity among parts. Finally, the rule on the continuation of the energy flow is termed "*xiang guanling*", which literally means mutual leading and governing. If calligraphic parts are treated as interacting persons, it is not surprising that they are also expected to abide by moral codes of human interaction. They have to cooperate with one another and adapt themselves to the group and the whole. They not only

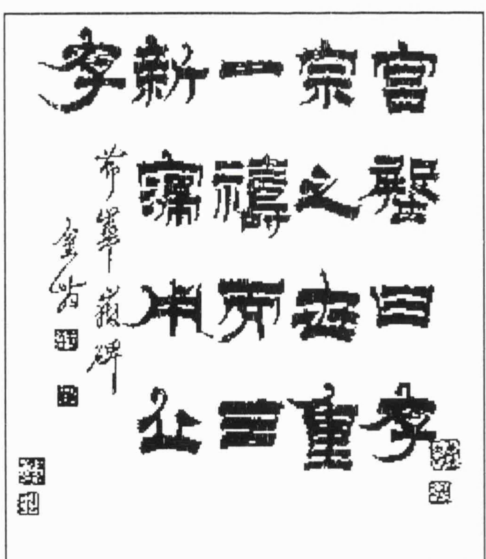
have to accommodate new members of the inked-strokes community, they are also supposed to act in accordance to one another as if they were interlocutors or engaging in some sort of social interaction. In brief, social values are embroidered in the warp and weft of calligraphic techniques.

Calligraphic technique, like other types of technology, "creates material forms that embody shared values and beliefs, tying people into orthodoxy through their everyday practices" (Bray 1997:369). As demonstrated in this chapter, the acquisition of desirable calligraphic techniques is simultaneously the acquisition of a set of related social values. In other words, desirable effects in brush techniques contribute to root fundamental social values in the primary bodily experience through the brush. However, calligraphic technique is but one of the many ways of engineering the personhood through the brush. In the following chapter, I shall continue this line of investigation.



Cursive script.
Xu Wei (1521-1593).

Seal script.
Wu Changshuo (1842-1927).

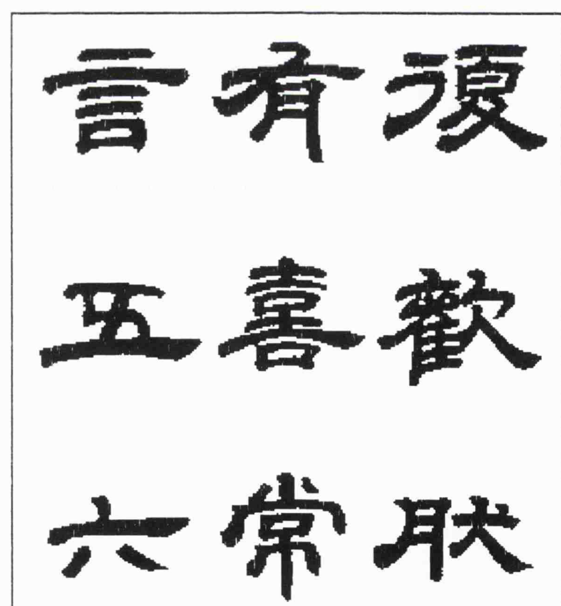


Clerical script.
Jin Nong (1687-1763).

Regular script.
Emperor Huizong (1082-1135)

Cursive script.
Su Shi (1036-1101).

Regular script.
Ouyang Xun (557-641).



Clerical script.
Deng Shiru (1743-1805).

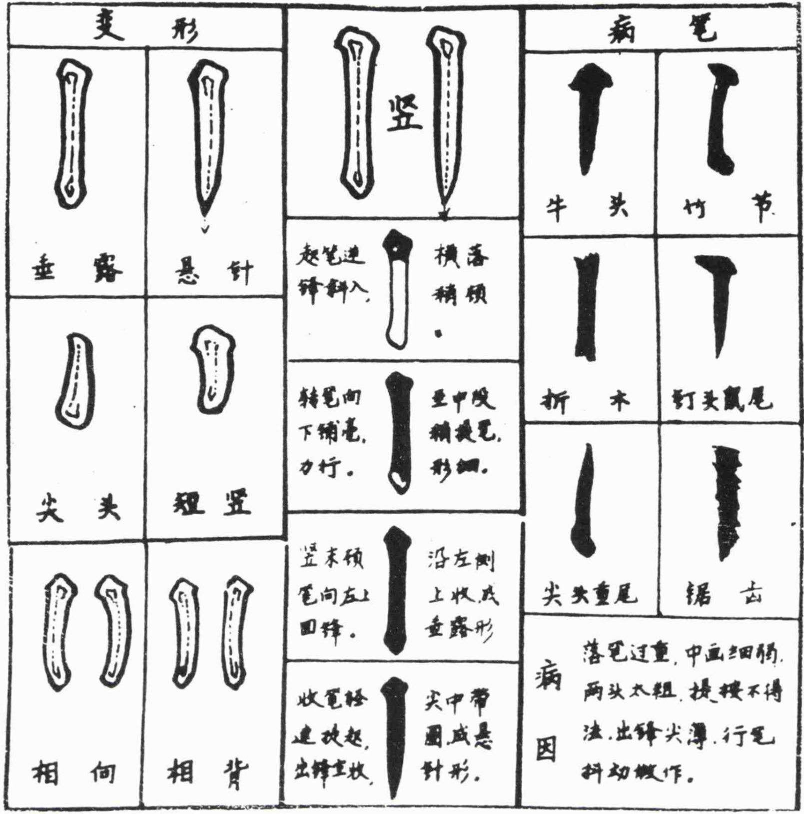
Fig. 4.10 Comparison of spatial organization among different styles.

Modulated stokes		Basic strokes	Defective strokes

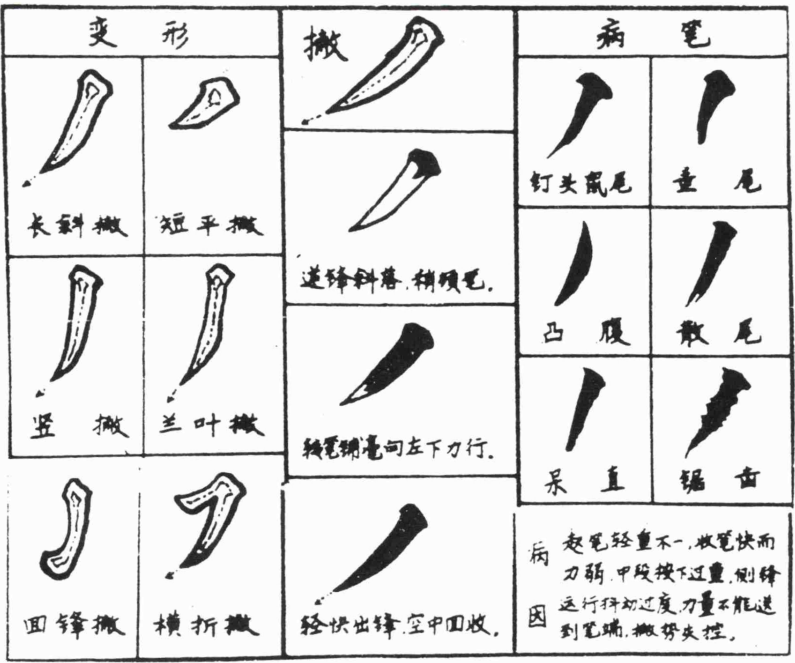
变形	横	病笔
平横	逆锋向左竖落,轻轻顿笔。	粗头
覆横	转锋向右,中锋运行,中段稍提,微细,力送至末。	翘嘴
仰横	折笔略上提,再向右下顿笔,回锋向左收笔。	柴担
右尖横		折木
左尖横		病因 起收笔轻重不一,或中段太粗,或平直呆板,笔画反复顿挫或多次涂描。

Horizontal line (*heng*)

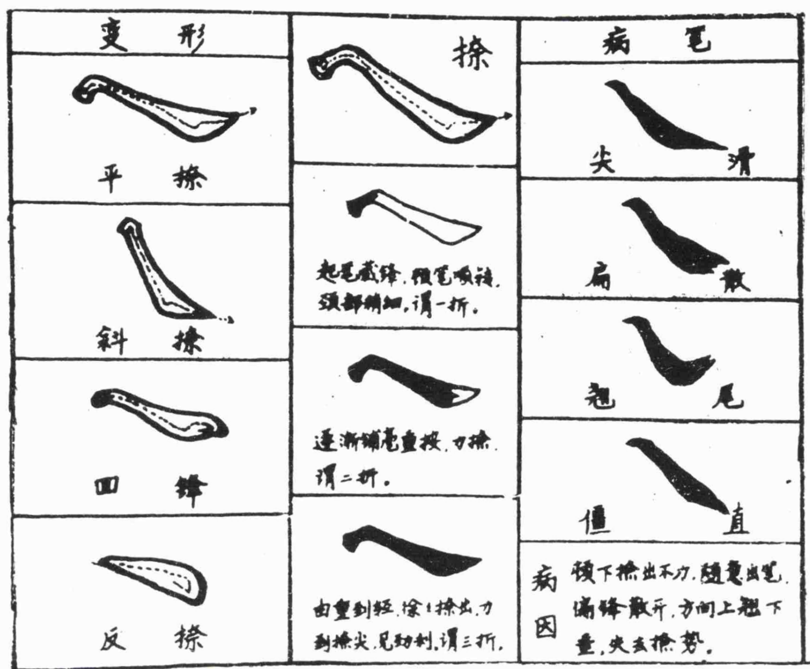
Dot (*dian*)



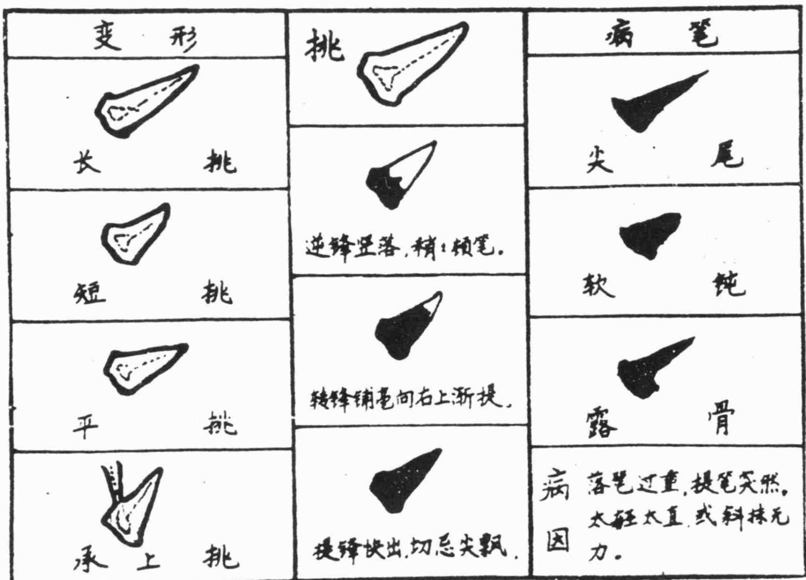
Vertical line (*shu*).



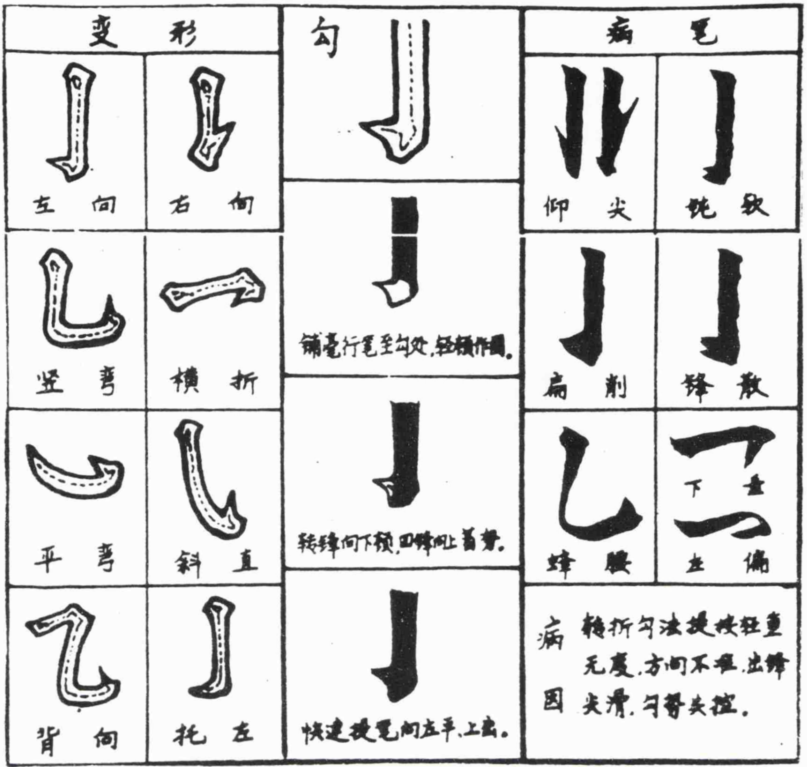
Sweeping-left stroke (*pie*).



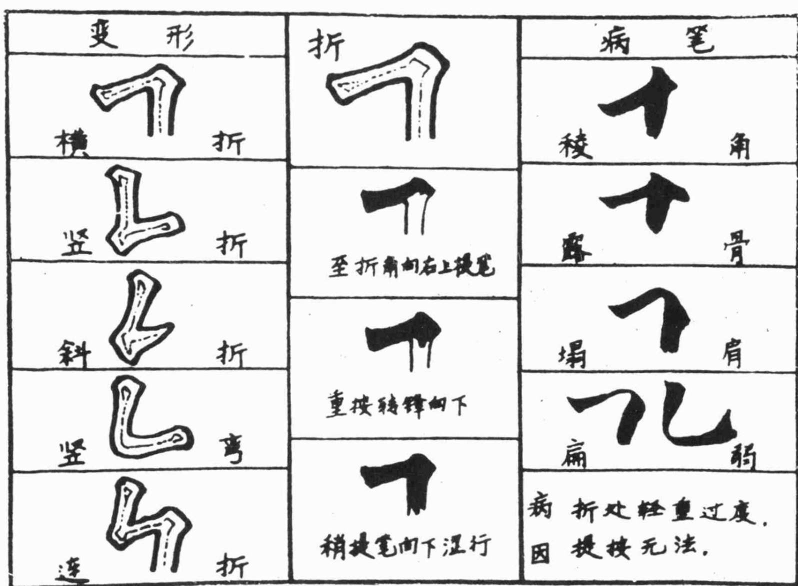
Sweeping-right stroke (*na*).



Rightward slanting stroke (*tiao*).



Hook (*gou*).



Angled stroke (*zhe*).

Fig. 4.2 Chart of defective strokes.

5. Body-Person Engineering (Continued): Tamed by the Brush

Literature in the Confucian tradition repeatedly stresses the importance of one's body in the process of learning to be human (Tu 1983:60; Bray 1997). Indeed, self-cultivation in its literary sense refers to the cultivation of the body (*xiushen*). The training of calligraphy, like ritual, "is a discipline of the body. It is intended to transform the body into a fitting expression of the self in our ordinary daily existence" (Tu 1983:60). In this chapter, I will show that calligraphy training is fundamentally the taming and moulding of the body-person, playing a significant role in the process of identity forming of the *wenren* (man of letter) class. Since the embodiment of the *wenren* identity in the practice of calligraphy "indicates the inscription and encoding of memory in somatic and somatized forms" (Lambek & Strathern 1998:13), we shall closely follow the registering of the somatized memory and watch how the caprice of the body is gradually subdued through the discipline of calligraphy.

5.1 Practising Calligraphy: the Cultivation of A Good Body and A Sound Mind

For Chinese calligraphers, writing calligraphy is not necessarily motivated by the desire for communication or creativity. More often, it is simply part of the daily routine carried out for a more practical concern - the desire to improve one's health. It is also treated as an effective way of empowering mental faculties, or subduing and developing the mind/heart (*yangxin*). In other words, to practice calligraphy is believed to be simultaneously a way of achieving artistic excellence, enhancing the physical health and improving mental agility and tranquillity. It not only mobilizes all bodily resources, but also sharpens one's sensitivity to the surrounding world.

Before plunging into the investigation on how calligraphy is regarded as a form of physical exercise, I shall look at the kinetic aspect of calligraphy. By pointing out the kinetic aspect of the Chinese art of writing, my intention is to bring calligraphers' somatic

involvement to the fore, thereby paving the way to the idea, commonly held by calligraphy enthusiasts, that practising calligraphy should form part of one's regime of daily exercise.

5.1.1 The Kinetic Aspect of Writing with Brush and Ink

To gain a better picture of how calligraphers actually use their bodies, we have to look at the postures of writing first. There are two basic postures: sitting and standing. The learning of calligraphy begins with adopting a "correct posture (*zhengque de zishi*)" (Fig. 5.1). In two introductory calligraphy classes of I observed[1], taught by two different teachers, held at an elementary school (*xiaoxue*) in Kunming, both teachers began the course by teaching the pupils the "correct posture" of writing, followed by instructions on the right way to hold the brush. They both verbally emphasized the importance of a correct posture by saying to the class "The first step toward the learning of calligraphy is the correct posture." Pupils were made to rehearse time after time a rhythmical oral formula (koujue) about the "correct posture", one they had obviously memorised very well.[2] The formula reads: head upright (*touzheng*), torso straight (*shenzhi*), shoulders level (*jianping*); chest relaxed (*shuxiong*), feet firmly planted on the ground (*jiaoshi*), two knees bent naturally (*liangjiao guanjie ziran wanqu*). One of the teachers added to the pupils' unanimous chanting of the formula: "And do not sit cross-legged or with ankle on knee (*bu qiao erlangtui*)".

We can compare the *kojue* with the instructions written on posters used for teaching (Fig. 5.1 while adopting the sitting position): head upright, shoulders level, back erect and straight, chest relaxed, elbow raised, and wrist suspended. While the feet are planted firmly on the ground on either side of the torso, the left elbow and hands rest on the desk and the torso should not touch the desk.[3] In the standing position, the same erect, unsupported but

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[1]Pupils in Kunming, from the third year on, are given classes on brush calligraphy once a week. Each class lasts for about forty-five minutes. The classes are called character-writing class (*xiezi ke*), for they form part of the character learning curriculum.

[2] The use of rhythmical pithy formula, koujue, is pervasive in elementary school classes. At hearing a verbal signal given by the teacher, pupils are trained to follow the teacher immediately by chanting taught *koujue* linked to different things taught. Though I observed many instances of this in classes, the almost automatic responses from the pupils and the degree of coordination between the teacher and the pupils never ceased to astound and amuse me. The same learning procedure can be found in brush painting. For instance, the learner is supposed to practise drawing an orchid while chanting the instructions for the movements involved in the drawing. I found these moments reminiscent of the chanting of political slogans.

[3] For right-handed people in this case. It is worth pointing out that the tradition suppressed the development of left-handedness.

supposedly relaxed posture is adopted. The sitting position is the one to be adopted by beginners. For each posture, there is a mobilization of the whole body (Chen 1989:88; cf. Wang 1981:21-25). First of all, the two feet have to be planted solidly on the ground to ensure the stability of the lower half of the body, which acts as a hinge for the upper-body movement. Similarly, the left half of the body forms the pivot for the movement of the right half, which is where most of the apparent activity is located. Streams of movement surge from the shoulder, to the elbow, then to the wrist, fingers, and finally reaches the brush. In a word, the force used to manipulate the brush runs through the entire body of the calligrapher.

Fig. 5.1 The sitting and standing postures.

The importance of assuming a correct posture while writing is not restricted to brush calligraphy. It also applies to writing with modern implements. One often hears parents saying to their children while writing homework, "How can you possibly write characters well if you don't sit straight (*zuo buzheng, zi zeme xiedehao*?)" What interests me most about these instructions is the repeated emphasis on the straightness (*zhi*) and uprightness (*zheng*) of the body - the upright head, straight torso, erected back and solidly planted feet on the ground. It is, in fact, consistent with emphasis on moral rectitude. The significance of this postural and moral consistency is examined in more detail later in the chapter.

These postures are as uncomfortable to adopt as they appear to be. To a novice in Chinese calligraphy, the assumed postures must be rigid and muscle-straining. I remember when I first started practising calligraphy with raised elbow (*xuanwan*), my whole right arm trembled and the characters thus produced quivered as a result of strained effort. To keep up these 'desirable' postures demands too much attention to be comfortable. On top of all this, the silent battle with the unyielding brush demands no less concentration than that required by taking up the correct posture. At the very beginning of the play, it is all conscious effort. When so many sensory channels are suddenly open wide, it is hardly surprising that it should be a challenging physical enterprise. Even after the posture and movement become fully internalized and hidden from immediate awareness, practising calligraphy remains an activity that inevitably mobilizes much one's physical resources. The calligrapher's back has to be fully alert. To rest the elbow on the desk would hinder the freedom of the bodily movement. It would also slacken the back muscles, which supply the energy required by the act of writing. Here is how a distinguished nineteenth-century calligrapher, He Shaoji, wrote about physical rigor demanded by the act of writing.

> "When I write I always suspend my wrist, holding my brush with a strength that comes from my heels, travels through my body and appears at my fingertips. The energy of my whole body is concentrated in the fingertips, and then I move my brush. Not half finished, I would be soaking wet with sweat." (cited in Kraus 1991:46)

The image painted here is one in which strength travels from the heels all the way up to the fingertips, which means almost the whole body is mobilized during the process of writing. The beautiful leaps and dives of the swishing brush often appear smoothly tranquil and

deeply therapeutic in the eye of an uninitiated observer. This nevertheless contrasts with relentless effort expended by the calligrapher. However, the vigourous physical effort depicted here is not necessarily experienced by everyone. My calligrapher informant insisted that the physical effect of writing does not usually result in drenching sweat, unless the written characters are unusually large and require a bigger than normal brush. With these varied opinions in mind, it is therefore not my intention to depict the process of writing as a sheer feat of strength and labour. Rather, as suggested in the previous chapter, the kinetic element of calligraphy writing is better understood as a training of bodily disposition, such as the reflex and motorial response.

The kinetic aspect of Chinese calligraphy is also highlighted by the fact that Chinese school children are asked to repeatedly 'draw' characters in the air with their arms while learning how to write. The widespread misconception that Chinese characters are pictographs (chapter 6) may have facilitated the view that Chinese children have to memorize vast numbers of little pictures in order to know how to read and write. An American I met in the field once voiced his amazement, after his eight-year struggle with Chinese characters. "How is it possible to remember all these thousands of different pictures?" The truth is that the Chinese do not read and write by thinking of characters as pictures. Learning Chinese characters is not so straightforward as memorizing thousands of characters visually. So, how do they learn?

It is a common experience for many literate Chinese for a character to look unfamiliar if they stare at it for a long time. The elements of the character start to appear randomly located and uncomfortably circumscribed within an imaginary square. At these moments, if one tries to write the character, one is often disconcerted by a sudden loss of ability to write that specific character, because no matter how one writes it, it always looks strange. Somehow, at these moments, the visual memory for the character is blocked and temporarily inaccessible. The common strategy employed by most people to escape this sudden estrangement is to carry on trying to write the character on paper. After a few attempts, it normally results in the hand gradually resuming the motorial rhythm needed to write that character. Suddenly, it re-emerges like a submarine resurfacing from the depths of the sea. It is obvious from these examples that when the visual memory is in disarray, one can still resort to the motor memory to retrieve learnt characters. However, it would be

reckless to jump to the conclusion that the Chinese learn characters as sets of different motor sequences, since the recognition of them (reading) certainly involves the acquisition and storing of visual information. Besides, speech and sound also provide a tremendously useful memory aid (DeFrancis 1984). It is, nevertheless, fair to suggest that the acquisition and storage of motorial information linked to each character can help explain the huge memory space required for the task. It would be a *mission impossible* to memorize the number of characters, each as an independent visual code, required of any literate Chinese (ibid.:163).[4] The role of motor memory in the activity of calligraphy will become even more obvious once we have understood the detailed process of learning calligraphy.

The role of motor memory in the act of writing is the same for every script (Kao 1991). However, in the case of Chinese characters, it is likely to be obscured by the mystique of ideograph (chapter 6). Besides, even though it is universal to all forms of writing, the Chinese have long been aware of the impact of writing on the body. I have been discussing the effect of calligraphy on the body from the perspective of motorial disposition. In contrast, for a traditional Chinese calligrapher, or even those who are slightly familiar with the ideology of calligraphy, the effect of calligraphy on the body is often about the calming and subduing of it.

5.1.2 Practising Calligraphy to Cultivate and Strengthen the Body-Person

All forms of art involve the use of body. A pianist engages his whole body to express the emotions and expressions aroused by the music.[5] A conductor's bodily movement is even harder to miss. His entire body billows with the flow of musical undulation. Opera singers' physical efforts are manifest in the oozing sweat during performances, while their internal organs resonate with the vibration of air within their bodies. Dancers in the traditional Japanese drum-dance utilize their whole body to generate the powerful sonorous effect of the drum in order to drive away evil spirits. Even the pencils and brushes of a Western painter cannot assume their life-giving power without the artist's body, which is why different rhythms of hand movements can often be detected from composition drawings by

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[4] Generally speaking, to be efficiently fluent in reading general newspaper or magazine articles, one would need to know at least seven thousand characters.

[5] It is a common knowledge that pianists sometimes rely on the motor memory for playing. However, this is seen to be rather dangerous, for once the flow of this memory is disturbed, the movement of fingers cannot be retrieved instantaneously in the middle of a recital.

different artists (Gombrich 1984:13-15).[6] The list can be extended infinitely. In other words, there is a kinaesthetic aspect in every module of artistic expression. The process of artistic production is inevitably linked to the utilization of sensory organs and muscles. So why should the use of body in Chinese calligraphy be pointed out specifically in this respect? This question is not hard to answer. Like dancers, Chinese calligraphers are perfectly conscious of the importance of bodily involvement in their art. And above all, in popular belief as well as in specialist discourse, the pursuit of artistic excellence goes hand in hand with the cultivation of the body-person (*yangshen*).

If the required physical vitality was fully acknowledged by calligraphy theorists in imperial times, it was through the aid of the idea of a human body constituted and activated by vital energy (*qi*).[7] A Kunming-based calligrapher once told me, "Chinese calligraphy and *qigong* share the same foundation (*xiangtong de*). This is why there is such a thing as *yidao bibudao* (lit. the intention has reached it, though the brush has not)." This idea of comparing the practice of calligraphy with the channelling of *qi* within the body is not new. For Daoists, *qi* is a member of the 'vital energy family'. With the help of special practices, such as meditation or energy channelling method,[8] these different vital energies can be set in free communication with the cosmic vital energy (Legeza & Rawson 1973; Jing 1994:525-528). In the process of meditation, vital energies can be visualized and guided via systems of circulation along fixed routes within the body. Bao Shichen (1775-1853, Qing calligrapher) once compared practising calligraphy with practising martial art: "In every single movement one should always allow the body to stretch to its natural limit, so that the internal *qi* in the body can be fully circulated and not knotted anywhere" (Bao Shichen, *Yizhou shuangji*, in Ji 1988:135-136). As a result, overt force will ensue and exhibit its full power, which is then displayed in brush strokes. The view is shared by an office worker in his thirties who enjoys

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[6] Gombrich points out that "If every draughtsman did not have his own personal rhythm, the connoisseur's effort of attributing drawings to masters would be hopeless." Raphael's compositional drawings are pervaded by a free-flowing movement. Walter Crane also suggested that those whose natural rhythm is to form loops should build up their forms from loops, whereas those with jerky natural rhythm should try alternative paths (Gombrich 1984:14).

[7] As Hay pointed out (Hay 1994), the translation of *qi* into "energy" is a problem of enormous importance in Sinology. A specific discussion on the problem can be found in Porkert 1974. Kaptchuk (1983:35-6) suggests that we can think of *qi* as "matter on the verge of becoming energy, or energy at the point of materializing." The lack of clear conceptualisation of the notion of *qi* can be attributed to the fact that *qi* is perceived functionally.

[8] This involves the adopting of special gymnastic postures together with breathing exercise in order to effectively mobilize the *qi* within the body (Jing 1994:526-530).

practising calligraphy: "*Xiezi* is like practising slow *qigong* (*man qigong*). It is about *yunqi* (directing one's *qi*, through concentration, to desired parts of the body) and *tuna* (an exercise linked to exhaling and inhaling), then the strength can reach the brush tip (*litou bijian*)." A retired calligraphy enthusiast made the link even more concrete to me,

> "While writing calligraphy, you can also practise *qigong*. Take writing eight strokes of the character *yong* for example. When writing the first dot, you have to inhale (*xiqi*). Once you finish writing the dot, you have to exhale (*tuqi*). Then, you smooth your *qi* (*pingqi*, *qi* means breath in this context) and write the next stroke. In other words, to write the character *yong*, you have to coordinate your breathing with the writing process."

This equating of calligraphic practice with *qigong*, is shared by many Chinese calligraphers, ancient and contemporary, living and dead. One of my calligrapher informants once explained to me the effect of *qi* in calligraphy. He said,

> "There are two types of *qi*, the first one tangible (*youxing de*), and the second intangible (*wuxing de*). The tangible *qi* is reflected in inked traces (*moji*), such as the width, length, density of strokes, and the speed of execution. Whereas, the intangible *qi* reflects multiple factors at the moment of writing. This is also why Chinese calligraphy cannot be repeated (*wufa chongfu*). Together with the field of *qi* (*qichang*) of the environment, these two *qi* are expressed in the inked strokes. Generally speaking, the life of calligraphers is longer than that of average people because their selves are merged with their *zi*, thereby finding a channel of outlet and extension (*yanshen*)."

Three elements of his statement are of special interest to my various arguments: First, calligraphy (*zi*) is an extension of the calligrapher's self; second, people who practise calligraphy enjoy unusual longevity; and third, the act of writing has to be situated within the joint effect of multiple factors, which includes the environment.

Practising calligraphy is regarded as an excellent way of developing this inner energy (*yangqi*), and therefore enhancing physical health. In this sense, it is indeed a form of bodybuilding, although the objective is not the strengthening of muscles. As a result, for calligraphers, the pursuit of artistic excellence goes hand in hand with the cultivation of a good body. This is why people believe that calligraphers are prone to longevity (*shuzhe duoshou*).[9] I have encountered some statistics to support this widely spread belief. Among

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[9] Kraus (1991:46), among many others, also mentions that all calligraphers insist on the fact.

the 1,940 recognised calligraphers in Chinese history, 419 of them lived to more than seventy, 137 to more than eighty, 27 to more than ninety and 4 lived to more than a hundred years of age (Chen 1989:88-89).[10] Admittedly, the statistics are no less anecdotal than the belief in calligraphers' longevity. Even though the figures fail to substantiate the folk conviction in a truly statistical way, the very attempt to provide it with a quasi-scientific evidence helps, albeit unintentionally, demonstrate the folk belief.

As a result of this folk belief, many people practise calligraphy as an everyday bodily exercise. Apart from practising *taiji quan* and *qigong* in parks, some retired urban dwellers also practice 'evanescent calligraphy' in city squares every day to keep in good form. In the central square of Luoyang, some people are reported to bring bottles of clear water and calligraphic brushes with which to write on the concrete surface of the square every day at dusk.[11] I call this 'evanescent calligraphy' because written characters with clear water dry out and vanish within minutes. Clearly the purpose is not so much to exercise creativity through the brush, but to *jianshen* (to strengthen and invigorate the body) and *yishen* (to relax the mind/spirit).[12] Another benefit, according to one of these public square calligraphers, is to save paper and ink. Some even claim that writing acts like finger massage, and promote handwriting as a therapy (*shuxie zhiliao*) (Liu 1997:304). Chen Lifu [a politically powerful man in the Guomindang government], interviewed on his centennial birthday, also claimed that he had been writing ten large sheets of calligraphy every morning for fifteen years to keep himself in a good shape.[13]

5.1.3 The Purification of Senses and the Calming of the Body-Person

Like most Chinese herbal medicine and medicine, the 'therapeutic effect' of calligraphy is also multifarious and above all, a hardly perceptible process. As daily exercise, calligraphic practice aims at both developing the body and mind. It is believed that practising calligraphy can exert a subtle influence on one's character and way of thinking. The term often used to describe how this effect works is *'qianyi-mohua'*. *Qian* means latent, hidden

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[10] Liu Gongquan (Tang calligrapher) died at the age of eighty-eight; Ouyang Xun (Tang calligrapher) at eighty-five; Wen Zhengming (Ming) at ninety-seven, and modern calligrapher Shen Yinmo died at eighty-nine (Liu 1997:304).

[11] *Renmin ribao*, overseas edition, 23 June 1997.

[12] Both *jianshen* and *yishen* are original Chinese terms used in the newspaper report.

[13] *Zhongyang Ribao*, overseas edition, 4 September, 1999.

and imperceptible; while *yi* means to change and alter. Similarly, *mo* means silent and *hua* to transform. As the term suggests, the effect of calligraphy on an individual's mind and character is silent and imperceptible. It gradually seeps in and transforms the person from inside without inducing in the writer any disturbing awareness of the change. It is a covert process of transformation.

So, apart from improving one's health, what are the multifarious effects (transformations) that practising calligraphy is believed to have on the body-person? One of the recurrent phrases in all my informants' comments is that it helps "cultivate your body-person (*xiushen*) and mould your nature/temperament (*yangxing*)". A casual statement made by a mother, who took her seven-year-old boy to a weekend extra-curriculum calligraphy class, casts some light. I asked her why she brought her child to the class every week. She told me,

> "On the one hand, practising calligraphy can help one *xiushen yangxing* (cultivate his mind/heart and mould his nature/temperament); on the other hand, it is good for his future when he enters society (*jinru shehui*). But mainly, it is to give him a method to *xiushen yangxing*, and help him to develop (*peiyang*) some extra-curriculum interests. Nowadays, society prefers versatile people (*quancai*). It is not good enough to be good academically (*guanghui dushu meiyouyong*, lit, there is little use in knowing only how to read books and study). You have to have many other specialities (*zhuanchang*) to stand out. Like my child, he is currently attending sketching (*sumiao*) classes as well. Calligraphy and painting should be interlinked in principle (*xiangtong*). In the future, having learned calligraphy (*xueguo shufa*) will help him to learn brush painting as well. But most important of all, practising calligraphy helps him to calm down (*jing xialai*). He can be very fidgety sometimes. Since he started practising calligraphy, he seems to be able to settle down more easily to study. It is rather effective."

She claimed that after attending the city's Youth Cultural Palace (*qingshaonian wenhuagong*) ninety-minute classes twice a week for a year, her first-grade boy had made significant progress in both concentration and discipline, to which she attributed his ever-improving academic results. She admitted her concern to prepare her child for "entering society". Among all her plans for his future, attending calligraphy classes was just one. At the same time, she also adhered to a seemingly less instrumental reason for making her child attend calligraphy classes - practising calligraphy helped him calm down and opened a path for her child to *xiushen yangxing*, to cultivate his mind/heart and mould his

nature/temperament. The mother also told me, "If he cannot clam himself down (*jing buxialai*), it is hard to do anything well, not to mention study well (*duhao shu*). Practising calligraphy (*lianzi*) definitely helps." Practising calligraphy helped to achieve both goals by its calming effect.

The point I want to put forward here is this: The calligraphic panacea, with all its multifarious effects, works first as a kind of non-medicinal tranquillizer. Let me explain this further by looking at what a retired calligraphy enthusiast said about his preparations for writing:

> "Practising calligraphy is good for *yangshen* (cultivating the body-person) because you are not supposed to harbour contaminating or distracting thoughts (*you zanian*). Your mind has to be very concentrated. It's absolutely not possible to write good characters if you are agitated and irritable (*maozao*). Writing is not as simple as just picking up the brush to write. When you are grinding the ink before writing, you have to conceive the composition (*gousi buju*). Before you start writing, you have to sit quietly for a few minutes and concentrate your attention (*ningshen*). But once you start writing, you are not supposed to stop, because the *qi* must not be interrupted. There is such thing as the rhythm (*yunlü* and *jiezou*) of writing. Once you start writing, you must not disrupt that rhythm. This is a problem of spirit (*jingshen*). So, if you can write fluently and smoothly (*xie de shun*), then your spirit will be delighted, then you feel that you've achieved something good, which is definitely beneficial to your body (*shenti*). Take Sun Guoting's *Shupu* for example. In this piece of work, he invested his own emotions and thought in the characters. So the strokes are like a tiger that has grown wings (*ruhu tianyi*, meaning with might redoubled)."

This preparatory procedure is not a result of his eccentricity. It is a firmly established attitude and requirement of Chinese calligraphy. Anyone who is even slightly serious about calligraphy would prepare him/herself in the manner just described. A thirty-something office worker who takes interest in calligraphy, also told me,

> "Practising calligraphy is good for your body (*dui shenti you haochu*), because it rectifies (*duanzheng*, lit. to make it straight) your writing posture. It also has the effect of modulating the heart/mind (*tiaojie xinli*). Besides, because you have to be very calm and tranquil (*jing*) while writing, it also helps you remove distracting thoughts (*paichu zanian*)."

In other words, practising calligraphy is believed to subdue impetuosity, to bring mental quietude, to pacify restlessness and to introduce an anchor to the ever-fidgety mind.

When the mind is floating (*xinfu,* meaning restless), practising calligraphy can smooth out the heart/mind (*pingxin*). When the spirit is bubbling with unrest (*qizao*), it subdues hyperactivity and reintroduces concentration (*zhuanxin,* lit. to focus the mind). Zhou Xinlian, a Qing calligrapher, once wrote "After sitting quietly and writing a few hundred characters, feelings of arrogance and impetuosity are smoothed out" (Ji 1988:43). This 'calming effect' of calligraphy practice was pointed out clearly by a Tang calligrapher, Yu Shinan:

> "When you are about to write, you should try to gather in the field of sight and refuse to listen to any surrounding noises (*shoushi fanting*). It is vital to cut yourself off from all distracting thoughts and raptly concentrate the heart/mind (*juelü ningshen*). If you can prepare yourself by rectifying the heart/mind and harmonising the spirit, then you will attune yourself with the rhythm of nature. On the contrary, if your hear/mind is distracted and unrectified (*xinshen buzheng*) and your *qi* and spirit in disarray (*zhiqi buhe*), your characters are bound to be tilted and unstable (*dianpu*)." (Yu Shinan, *Bisui lun*, in Ji 1998:308)

The effort at perfecting calligraphy is simultaneously an endeavour to calm the mind and distil the thoughts. A serious calligraphy enthusiast makes it his objective to exercise control over his mental lucidity and emotional stability. All these effects can be summed up by the word '*jing* (calmness and quietude)'. My retired calligraphy enthusiast informant pointed out to me, "For the Chinese, *jing* is very powerful (*hen lihai*). You need to have this *jing* to do many things, such as writing verses, essays, writing calligraphy, reading and playing musical instruments." He went on to say that "Chinese calligraphers generally boast high moral achievement (*xiuyang gao*). If you are fidgety (*maoli maozao*), you can' t possibly become a calligrapher."

Often, the process of calming and concentrating is facilitated by lengthy preparations before writing. This is constituted mainly by the grinding of ink. Before the recent invention of ready-made ink sold in plastic bottles, fresh ink for writing was produced by rubbing an ink stick in water on an ink stone. Ink sticks are made of pine soot mixed with glue and other ingredients, compressed into square or round sticks. The grinding action extracts ink slowly from the stick and mixes it with water. The surface texture of the ink stone plays an important part in determining the quality of ink produced. The finer the grain of the stone, the smoother the ink and the longer it takes to produce the ink. The procedure of grinding ink is traditionally considered an almost sacred rite, for it has a meditative effect and

prepares the mind for the actual writing (Long 1987:89). Fast movement is categorically discouraged. Besides, while grinding, the ink stick has to remain upright. Simply picture this: The slow circular motion of the hand repeats until the ink has reached the right consistency and quantity. As one grinds the ink, the gaze normally focuses on the repetitive circular motion of the hand and the ink stick, slowly, sedately, and hypnotically. The sound of the pine-soot ink stick trudging along on the stone fills the ears, smooth and unintrusive, pure and humming. The hand is set on a lethargic and repetitive wheel of motion. As the ink is released into the water, so does the smell of musk, camphor or pine soot (the carcass of pine) infuse the nose of the slow-moving ink grinder.

The so-called "meditative effect" of grinding ink works via all senses: the visual, the acoustic, the olfactory and the kinaesthetic. It is a process that purifies sight, smell, hearing and motion, while sitting with one hand and forearm resting on the table and the other in repetitive circular motion. All this preparation aims to purify thoughts, which is coterminous with the rectification of the heart/mind. The term used to describe the state of purification is *zhuanyi* (lit. focus on single one). This is exactly what the ink-grinding procedure helps to achieve - single movement, single sound, single smell and single sight. Monotony and purity of sensory stimuli shroud the ink grinder in a secluded state, a state demanded for the act of writing. They also contribute to the calming of the body and mind, required for the same act. Various writers have described the ideal state for writing as "*juelü ningshen*" - to cut oneself off from all distracting thoughts and concentrate the heart/mind/spirit (*shen*) (Tang Emperor Taizong), and "*yingshen jinglü*" - to purify the heart/mind/spirit and cleanse away distracting thought and worries (Ouyang Xun, Tang calligrapher). At this point, it would not be rash to draw the conclusion that practising calligraphy is simultaneously the purification of senses and the calming of the body-person (Fig. 5.2).

Fig. 5.2 Practising calligraphy with utmost concentration. (Source:*Shanghai shaonian ertong huaxuan*. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1973)

To introduce a piece of external, though perhaps not decisive, evidence, I draw upon some findings from experimental psychology. In recent years, a series of psycho-physiological tests have been carried out in order to provide traditional calligraphy theory with scientific evidence or modification. For example, Kao (1991) introduced a few psycho-physiological indices, such as heart rate, breathing and blood pressure, to verify whether writing calligraphy really had a 'calming' effect on the writer. His finding concludes that writing calligraphy does significantly reduce the heart rate, slow down the breathing and lower the blood pressure. He compared the psycho-physiological effects of writing calligraphy with those of transcendental meditation: Both induce a relaxed state in the practitioner. This is reflected in the slowing-down of the heart rate, breathing and metabolism, the reduction of blood pressure and increased breathing efficiency (deeper breathing). Like most anthropologists, I am more interested in how a cultural phenomenon is construed than whether it is scientifically proven. Notwithstanding, if we are willing to bypass the potentially subjective handling of the data involved in the process of interpretation, the available scientific evidence may suffice to point out the experiential basis of a calligraphic ideology, i.e., the ideology of the calming and purification of the body-person.

5.1.4 The Rectification Moral Character

Practising calligraphy as a way of transforming the body-person does not end with health-boosting, calming and purification. It also has the ability to rectify one's moral character. Practising calligraphy is believed to have the effect of *dunping*. The character *dun* has double meanings. Firstly, it means upright, honest and sincere. Secondly it can also mean to strengthen or deepen. *Ping* means character. In other words, another effect of calligraphy on the heart/mind is to cultivate an upright character. Given the fact that the learning of calligraphy consists predominantly in the copying of masters' work, as we shall see later in the chapter, and that calligraphy is considered a moral-spiritual-bodily extension of the calligrapher (the body-person), it is inevitable that a total immersion in this realm of moral rectitude by diligent daily practice and emulation is believed to have a positive impact on one's own spiritual and moral quality.

Practising calligraphy can also cultivate beautiful, exquisite, refined, sophisticated and, above all, respectable sentiments, especially those of the high-brow category (*peiyang youmei yu gaoshang de qingcao*). Not only is the phrase frequently used by academic writers, it is also one of many phrases that even school children can recite spontaneously and use repeatedly in their writing composition classes. When talking about fine arts or other 'good and positive' activities, people use these phrases habitually, as if they were so incredibly well rehearsed and readily at hand that no thought is needed to retrieve them. This is the degree to which people are conditioned to believe in the transformative power of calligraphy and other fine arts on one's mind and character.[14]

To recapitulate my argument in this section, practising calligraphy is believed to have multifarious effects: It improves one's physical health, moulds one's temperament, calms and purifies the mind, senses and thought, rectifies one's moral character, as well as refines one's sentiments. All these transformations of the body-person are grounded in the learning process. In the following section, I will show how the *process* of social imprinting on individual body-person, in the case of Chinese calligraphy, is concretized in the enactment

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[14] It was pointed out to me by one of my informants that contemporary artists do not seem to fit into this category. They are said to deliberately grow unkempt beards and dress tattily in order to mark themselves from the general crowd. One of my informants, a member of an artist's family, told me that his artist cousin was like this. He jokingly said that "As if the only thing you need to do to make people have confidence in the quality of your art is to dress slovenly and grow a big beard (*da huzi*)."

of actual practice.

5.2 The Learning Process Magnified

5.2.1 The Anatomy of Learning Procedures

The traditional way of learning Chinese calligraphy is, to a large extent, carried out in an apprenticeship fashion, i.e., model learning (cf. Tu 1983:63).[15] Unlike classroom teaching and learning, knowledge is acquired through observation and conscious imitation. Few verbalized rules and principles are articulated. In this respect, the knowledge that is passed on is of a practical nature. What is acquired through the learning of calligraphy is a kind of embodied and contextualized knowledge. It is learning through doing (Lave 1988; 1990; cf. Bloch 1991). The standard procedures have remained unchanged since the imperial period.[16] It is true that contemporary teaching methods adopted in elementary schools have taken a modern twist. However, the learning procedures, in the main, remain unaltered. The differences that do exist will be pointed out at due intervals.

The main discussion in this section pivots around the traditional mode of learning. The complete trajectory of learning is composed of two seemingly discrete stages: first, acquiring the techniques and styles of past masters through strict imitation, and then developing one's own style. The apparent separation of the two phases is, admittedly, artificial, but analytically indispensable. During the first imitation phase, it is generally agreed that work by a past master should be one's first model.[17] The reason is, understandably, that their works have survived the test of history and therefore stand on reliably solid ground. The degree of solidity depends on two factors: artistic excellence and moral quality. To copy a past master is to copy both his artistic and moral achievements. As will emerge from the following pages, this duality of the acquisition process lies at the very core of the learning of Chinese calligraphy.

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[15] Model learning is also practised in music and ritual in imperial China (Tu 1983:63).

[16] Information on the learning process as practised in imperial times comes mainly from written texts and some from interviews with calligraphy practitioners.

[17] There is not a very big pool of renowned works from which different learners normally pick, for different considerations, as first models. Generally speaking, the works of Yan Zhenqing, Liu Gongquan and Ouyang Xun, all of them Tang calligraphers, are by far the most favourite first models.

How is it Copied?

Copying is conducted in two ways: *mo* and *lin*. *Mo* means exact copying, i.e., to place the writing paper directly on the model work then trace the inked trajectories. *Lin* means free copying, that is to place the model work alongside the writing paper so that one can constantly go back and forth between model characters and one's own writing in progress. While the gaze travels between the two, one is expected to reproduce the master's writing as closely as possible. *Mo* is the first stage of imitating the chosen work of a past master. It is then followed by the method of *lin*.

Stage 1: Exact Coping/Tracing (*Mo*)

In the first stage - *mo* - brush movement is guided by the model work on two dimensions[18] by the shadows shown through the writing paper. Since one need not worry about the layout of individual strokes (i.e., the composition), one can lavish all attention on grappling with the brush. The training is therefore purely technical - how to reproduce strokes that assume similar outward appearance to those written by the master. Moreover, because of the interdiction against retouching any already written strokes, this outward resemblance has to be achieved through one smooth flow of brush movements. At this stage, the apprentice is expected to acquire an intimate knowledge of the correlation between brush movements and inked calligraphic forms. Afterwards, the model work is moved from underneath the writing paper to be juxtaposed with it. Thereby the apprentice advances to the second stage of copying - *lin*.

Stage 2: Free Copying (*Lin*)

The second stage (*lin*) is, in theory, a more advanced stage of copying because the apprentice's brush is suddenly released from the confines of the master's inked shadows that prescribed its trajectory until now. Placed alongside writing paper, the model work is constantly checked by the apprentice to make sure his writing does not diverge from the original in appearance. And because at the very moment of writing one cannot possibly stare at the model character, it is never the direct perception of the model character that guides

[18] There are two other dimensions involved in the production of a piece of calligraphic work, that is, the dimension on the axis perpendicular to the writing (paper) surface and the temporal dimension. The former is about the lifting and pressing of the brush; and the latter the speed and pace of execution. The end result of these two dimensions are often eclipsed in the finished work, made especially inaccessible by the process of reproduction - prints or rubbing.

the movement of the brush. Instead, mental images of the master's inked characters become a surrogate model. The apprentice is expected to draw on the brush techniques (i.e., the knowledge of the correlations between brush movements and inked forms) he acquired in the first copying stage and reproduce the master's calligraphic strokes aided by their mental images. To strengthen these memories, the apprentice is advised to study the model work very closely first, scrutinizing it to the minutest and most subtle details. This process of scrutinizing model characters is called *dutie*, i.e., to read the *tie* (model work). Then, he closes his eyes and envisions the characters with ultimate concentration. He goes back and forth between the processes of scrutinizing and envisioning, as if to engrave the model work on his mental plate. Ideally, one should be able to mentally manipulate these images to minimize or maximize them freely in size without distortion. Meanwhile, he is also supposed to imagine the whole process of writing such a character in the head, the complete trajectory of the master's brush movement. This includes details such as the force applied to the brush (Chapter 4), the angles in which the brush tip is bent, and even the speed at which the brush sweeps across the paper surface. In other words, at this stage the resemblance between one's writing and the model work is a product of visual assimilation (by means of generating solid mental images) transcribed into a series of motor reproductions.

Though stressing the role of mental images in guiding the motor reproduction, I do not imply the primacy of the visual over the motorial modality in the mechanism of learning Chinese calligraphy. On the contrary, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the learning process is, to a large extent, about the assimilation of sets of bodily propensities linked to kinetic movement. In other words, these two modalities - visual and motorial - are equally indispensable. Before delving further into a discussion of the implications of the learning process, it may be useful to make an excursion into contemporary practice.

5.2.2 A Brief Note on Contemporary Practice

As one reads through my discussion on the learning process (a step-like process advancing from tracing to free copying, and later freehand writing, as we shall see), one might wonder whether the description still applies to the contemporary learning process of Chinese calligraphy. The answer is yes. In all calligraphy classes that I observed in Kunming, either as part of the school curriculum or as paid extra-curricular classes, students were often asked to watch their teacher write a few characters, then return to their seats and

repeatedly copy these characters (or sometimes, the teacher sat beside the student and demonstrated). Later the student returned to the teacher and watched him circle the well copied characters or parts of characters with red/cinnabar ink (sometimes this is done by the teacher at home). Occasionally, the teacher would show the students how to write specific strokes by writing himself, together with a very brief verbal instruction. In this way the student was able to observe a 'live' performance of writing, thereby acquiring some idea about the actual motor components of the practice. The teacher sometimes more precisely transmitted the motor aspect of writing by holding the hand of a pupil to show him the correct way to hold the brush and to write a character before he was permitted to write on his own. Leung's description of the calligraphy learning process in 17th and 18th century elementary schools bears much similarity to what I describe here. "Writing with the brush began slightly later than, or at the same time as this first phase (recognizing the characters)... These beginners were only allowed to write simple, big characters by imitating popular models of the standard (regular) script... Writing was practised every morning during the second morning session and the teacher marked each well and badly written character in order to encourage or to discourage the child" (Leung 1985:393-4).

But this opportunity to observe writing in action does not replace the standard procedure I described earlier. Students still have to practice in the same way as in the classical learning process. In fact, the practical demonstration (by teachers or family members who assumed the role) have always coexisted with the solitary copying of master's work in imperial times. In the classes I observed, students were also required to submit weekly calligraphy homework, in which they copied several pages of characters from ancient masters' work or the teacher's own writing. Then the teacher would return it to the students with circles of red ink to mark out the well written bits. Therefore, contemporary practice has not diverged perceptibly from the classical approach.

5.2.3 What is Copied?

At first glance, there does not seem to be anything unusual about the whole process of learning through copying. But by asking one question, the clarity is lost. The question is: What exactly is copied? The outward form is the first thing likely to pop into one's head. In other words, it is highly desirable to have one's characters 'look like' those of ancient masters. However, my calligrapher informant has more to say on this subject. I asked him

what he thought students should learn from copying master's work. He told me,

> "They should learn the brush techniques (*bifa*) and the graphic form (*xingtai*). They should never trace the outline (*miao*) of model characters. *Xie* (writing) is a highly complex act. When one starts learning calligraphy, one wants one's characters to look like model characters. But the truth is that once you've mastered the brush techniques of the model work, outward similarity naturally ensues. That is why one should aim at acquiring the brush techniques of the master work, rather than its outward form."

He obviously voted brush techniques, rather than form, as number one objective to learn from past masters. However, he also suggested that a similarity in form ensues once brush techniques were acquired, which is why the imitation of form is not of primary concern. Or put another way, it is to "shoot two hawks with one arrow (*yijian shuangdiao*), or to kill two birds with one stone (*yishi erniao*)" as the Chinese would put it. Learning the brush techniques of a model work therefore also enable one's characters to 'look like' the model characters. This brings out an interesting question: What are the elements that contribute to the production of the outward form? A concise answer to the question is: the composition (which includes the layout of individual characters, the interplay and graphic combinations of different characters), and the brush techniques. The motor aspect of brush technique is self-evident. So-called brush technique essentially constitutes a stock of knowledge about correlations between brush movements and calligraphic forms. In other words, it is information about how different motor movements (of the hand/body and the brush) produce different calligraphic results in the form of inked shape. What about the composition? As argued in chapter 4, the composition of a piece of calligraphic work is fundamentally about the interplay among individual strokes or individual characters. No calligraphic stroke stands alone on paper. Each one is situated in a web of calls and responses, actions and reactions. A proper copying of model work cannot leave out this pattern of spontaneously habitual and habitually spontaneous responses.

By stressing the spontaneous and habitual pattern of the graphic arrangements that I wish to draw the readers' attention, once again, to the motorial side of calligraphic composition. The point can be grasped by a comparison with table tennis. In the case of table tennis, the grace displayed in returning a ball is the result of long-term practice (therefore the building up of a wide repertoire of response-to-stimuli correlations) and quick

judgement of the situation (therefore a spontaneous activation of suitable responses).[19] They are both bodily techniques to be acquired. This also depicts the process of learning Chinese calligraphy. Long-term involvement in the practice nurtures sets of bodily propensities that can be selectively activated according to varied situations. Put more concisely, the training of calligraphy is fundamentally rooted in the development of a repertoire of bodily dispositions linked to the interaction of brush strokes - the consecutive calls and responses, actions and reactions of brush strokes.

Having highlighted the motorial aspect of outward calligraphic forms, we shall now return to the process of copying. As far as outward form is concerned, the ultimate goal of copying is to 'reproduce' the model work by a different hand in a different time and space. Since the original work is produced by a sequence of brush and body movements, it is not surprising to say that 'perfect copying' demands the reproduction of these. Any divergence in brush movement is bound to be registered as discrepancy in outward form. No lapse in time in lifting and pressing the brush will escape a connoisseur's eye, at least hypothetically speaking. Although in practice no single movement can be identically reproduced, it does not stop being the ideal goal. In other words, to copy the past master's work as closely as possible, the apprentice is obliged to gradually appropriate the master's bodily movement dispositions to the minutest detail while writing, so far as brush techniques and calligraphic composition are concerned. By assimilating a past master's bodily techniques and propensities, the apprentice is able to reproduce visually similar, or 'ideally' identical writing. That is to say, through copying the outward appearance of past master's writing the apprentice actually copies his bodily propensities of movement, therefore his body techniques. The joint venture of visual assimilation and motor reproduction in the process of copying provides the apprentice with the opportunity to mould his own body 'in the shape of the master's'. The apprentice literally alters his body in order to learn the master's skills of writing.

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[19] The boundary between habits and spontaneity, which is conveniently sustained by the stereotype that habits are constituted by sets of mechanical responses, whereas spontaneity is composed of sparks of mind-refreshing response, begins to blur. By pointing out the often necessary habitual basis of spontaneity, I wish to show that it is a well recognized point by Chinese calligraphers. This is revealed in their uncompromising emphasis on discipline (calligraphers' view of discipline, therefore the indigenous exegesis), even though discipline often serves to implement regimentation (we can perhaps call it Western popular view). At this point the tension between the emic and the etic points of view looms large.

But acquiring the brush techniques of a master's work is not the end of the story. Apart from the outward form, there are other things to be copied. If one can only produce writing which looks like that of a past master, one is scorned as a second-rate copyist, a collector of past masters' writing. This is certainly not enough to make a good calligrapher. According to my calligrapher informant Yao:

> "More important than *linmo* is to study the model work (*dutie*), so that you can learn how ancient masters organize the rhythm of brush strokes. You also need to learn how they master the force, because even just a slight difference in force will result in enormous difference in what you write. Apart from brush techniques, force and rhythm, there is also the problems of tools and postures. You can hardly demand all of these factors to be the same as ancient masters, that is why it is easy to achieve similarity in form but hard to achieve the similarity in spirit/*shen* (*xingsi yi*; *shensi buyi*). Take the three famous copies (*moben*) of Wang Xizhi's *Orchid Pavilion Preface* for example. They all adopted the method of tracing the outline of the original characters first then fill in with ink (*shuanggou*). But the difference in individual writing habits and tools explains the fact that these three copies look very different. It points out the fact that the similarity in form does not guarantee the similarity in spirit/*shen*."

What imbues calligraphy with life is its *shen* (spirit or aura, Chapter 3). For certain, copying also implies the assimilation of these spirit/moral qualities. But this cannot become the objective of learning before the apprentice has succeeded in reproducing the appearance of the master's work.

What is interesting about the order of acquisition here is that appearance is regarded as a prerequisite to *shen*/spirit. Nevertheless once *shen*/spirit is acquired, appearance becomes redundant and is demoted as secondary. The outward form is only a necessary means to the end. But it is important to bear in mind that while copying the outward appearance, the apprentice also appropriates the bodily techniques of the past master. Besides, the fact that similarity in appearance makes similarity in spirit possible means that the moulding the body of the apprentice is a prerequisite to the assimilation of spirit, at least in the case of calligraphy. In this regard, the appropriation of form is at the same time the appropriation of the *shen*/spirit. Therefore, ideally, three categories are copied: calligraphic form, body techniques and *shen*/spirit. Copying as a learning method is indeed a process of somatic and spiritual/moral assimilation. In other words, to learn Chinese calligraphy satisfactorily is to undergo a somatic and spiritual/moral transformation that brings one

closer to past masters, who are often paragons of moral virtue. To copy the master's work is to 'enter' the personhood of the master with one's own body. It is to shape one's body in the form of the master's, and to acquire the master's backbone, flesh, tendon, blood and vein (*mo*) (chapter 3). The transformation that the apprentice undergoes in the learning process is two-fold. He, while transforming the physiognomy of his writing, transforms his own body-person.

This is why the work of Zhao Mengfu, though viewed highly in a strictly art-historian sense, is nonetheless regarded unsuitable as a model for beginners. Zhao's case is of particular interest in the context of the present discussion because it provides a perfect example of a calligrapher who is technically impeccable, but morally imperfect. As a result, his work has long been deemed somehow defective. Feng Ban (1602-1671, Ming/Qing) criticised Zhao's writing as well as his moral quality, "Zhao Mengfu has no backbone. As a result, his calligraphy lacks energy and nobility" (quoted in Billeter 1990:238). His moral defect was emphatically highlighted when the issue of loyalty to the Chinese nation became topical within the specific social-historical context.

> "The reprobation against Zhao Mengfu became general when China was invaded by Manchus in 1644. Fu Shan (1607-1684, a distinguished calligrapher of late Ming and early Qing dynasties) was among those who took an active part in the resistance; when it failed, he held aloof for the rest of his life in uncompromising opposition to the foreign dynasty. No wonder then that after 1644 he turned away from Zhao Mengfu and looked instead to Yan Zhenqing, who oriented him aesthetically in a completely different direction and whose life also set him an example of a sterling strength of character. Under Yan's influence, Fu Shan was won over to a type of calligraphy in which the expression of individuality and moral independence outweighed any concern for elegance and compliance with established canons" (Billeter 1990:122).

Yan Zhenqing (709-780) was a Tang calligrapher and high-ranking court official who is noted for his loyalty to the crown, righteousness and fortitude of character. Yan's writing diverged significantly from the aesthetic mainstream of Chinese calligraphy represented by Wang Xizhi. His style is extremely forceful, heavy and emphatic, characterised by full-bodied broad strokes, unlike the elegance of Wang and Zhao's

writing.[20] With his "upright brush", to paraphrase McNair (1998), Yan's regular-style (*kaishu*) calligraphic work has long been regarded as the best model work, though not entirely without controversy, for calligraphy beginners. His works, such as "Inscription of the Altar of the Immortal Lady (*magushan xiantan ji*)", "Autograph Diploma (*zishu gaoshen*)" and "Inscription at the Monastery of the Thousand Buddhas (*duobaota*)", to name just a few, are still among the most popular model works for calligraphy beginners in contemporary China. As a result, printed copies of these works can be bought in almost every bookshop. It is exactly this irreproachable integrity of Yan[21] that steered Fu Shan away from the more seductive writing of Zhao Mengfu (see Fig. 4.3), the "easy touch and full-bodied shaping" which had once delighted him (Billeter 1990:116; 238). Fu Shan despised Zhao Mengfu because he studied Wang Xizhi all his life, but failed to acquire Wang uprightness, which is why he yielded to facility. He remarked "One must be a man before being a calligrapher" because "A man's handwriting infallibly reveals his morals." In the same vein of thought, Liu Xizai[22] succinctly said, "The practise of writing is a perfecting of the spirit. To hope to surpass the calligraphy of someone to whom one is spiritually inferior, that is indeed a waste of effort." In other words, if one tries to emulate the work of a master, one had better try to cultivate his spiritual/moral nature first.

However, not every calligrapher in imperial China believed that one's calligraphy was revelatory of one's moral nature, despite it being a very popular belief. Song calligrapher Su Shi (chapter 3) once wrote,

"By examining a piece of writing, one can deduce the writer's moral nature.

[20] Yan's *zi* was once described as resembling "a country bumpkin with arms akimbo and feet side by side (*chashou bingjiao tianshehan*)" (Yu 1992:385).

[21] One of the most famous surviving pieces of calligraphic work is Yan Zhenqing's "The Draft of the Eulogy for Nephew Jiming (*jizhi Jiming wengao*)" in semicursive style (*xingshu*, or called running style), currently preserved in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. The draft is an obituary notice written three years after the quelling of An Lushan rebellion against the ruling Tang dynasty. Yan organised the resistance and his army of two hundred thousand men eventually saved the dynasty. However, both his nephew (Yan Jiming) and cousin (Yan Gaoqing) were killed resisting the rebels. The rebels took Yan Gaoqing's son, Yan Jiming, hostage and demanded that he surrender. Yan Gaoqing's son was slain before his eyes after he refused. Yan Gaoqing himself was later captured and dragged before An Lushan but still refused to bow down. So he was eventually drawn and quartered. The draft was written when the remains of Yan Jiming were passing through the city for final interment. It is considered one of the finest examples of writing in Chinese history, second only to Wang Xishi's *Lanting Jixu*. For more on Yan's life and work, see McNair, 1998.

[22] Qing calligrapher (1813-1881). Author of *Yigai* (Outline of the Arts), the fifth part of which *Shugai* (Outline of Calligraphy) is an influential treaty on calligraphy. The quote is from *Shugai*.

> The gentleman and the lowly man there stand revealed for certain. So it is said. But this is an error. People can no more be judged by their writing than by their looks." (quoted in Billeter 1990:266n)

Su's view is in fact embraced by many contemporary Chinese calligraphers and theorists (or calligraphy-related professionals). Seemingly, they purge calligraphy of 'moral contamination' and concentrate on its purely aesthetic concerns. However, as I have tried to show in chapter 3, the popular idea about handwriting still reflects, to a large extent, the deeply ingrained conviction of a calligraphy-moral tie. Take Su Shi for example. Although he publicly tried to sever the tie between handwriting and moral quality, he was in fact an admirer and vehement advocate of the promotion of Yan Zhenqing's writing as model calligraphy. He often wrote about the centred-brush tip (*zhongfeng*) technique (chapter 4) of Yan and praised him as free from the seductive demeanour associated with the slanted-brush tip (*cefeng*, or *loufeng*) techniques of Wang Xizhi (McNair 1998:60-82). He, together with his mentors Ouyang Xiu and Cai Xiang, promoted Yan's calligraphy precisely because of Yan's reputation for uprightness and his characteristic upright brush technique (ibid.). It should be pointed out that the severing of the tie between calligraphy and moral nature is most popular among calligraphy-related professionals - the people most exposed to debates on calligraphic issues. In contrast, people who are less critical, or not familiar enough with the calligraphic tradition to be critical at all, tend to embrace more readily the mainstream idea about the calligraphy-moral tie. But why are people willing to go through the discipline of calligraphic training? The prospect for social climbing is one of the main reasons.

5.3 The Social Propeller of the Discipline Through Calligraphy

5.3.1 Moulded in the Shape of Masters in the Pursuit of Self-Realisation

In Imperial China, when writing was conducted with brush and ink, brush calligraphy had an overarching importance in determining one's political prospects. This can be elucidated by the way local or central administrators and magistrates were chosen. Public national examinations were held, in which examinees wrote articles and composed poems on a designated topic. The quality of one's calligraphy - as an index of the writer's personhood (chapter 3) - played an important role in one's success in those examinations. Although the examiners could not judge the examinees face to face, they could assess the

examinee's character and moral standard through his calligraphy. Such assessment was crucial to the examination result, therefore affecting the political prospects of the candidates. Let us look at some examples.

The Tang dynasty witnessed one of the peaks of calligraphic achievement in Chinese history. According to Wang (1995), calligraphy was extremely popular not just among the elite and men of letters but also among commoners (*buyi*), including women.[23] The major reason for this widespread popularity lay in its promotion by the emperors[24] and the place it played in the recruiting process. Many authors believe that one of the major reasons for the unmatched popularity of calligraphy in Chinese society is its direct link with social climbing within government service (Wang 1995; Chen 1997, etc.). Calligraphy to serve this purpose is often called *ganlu shufa*, lit. calligraphy for the purpose of seeking official posts. Government official recruitment in the Tang dynasty set clear guidelines on calligraphy - i.e., the handwriting of the candidates - as a criterion for recruitment. The first phase of the examination involved the assessment of the candidate's calligraphy. This was followed by an assessment of their speech. If there were too many candidates, the second phase could be skipped. If the calligraphy was appraised as excellent, the candidates were granted official posts (*shouyi guanzhi*) (Wang 1995:161-2). Moreover, Tang emperor Taizong ordered that all officials above the fifth rank had to improve their calligraphy by attending instructive

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[23] Wang's study on the general social atmosphere of calligraphy and cultural practice of the Tang dynasty reveals many aspects of calligraphy-related practices long neglected by Western writers on the subject. During the Tang Dynasty, it was not just women of aristocratic origins who received a similar education in classic texts as the male members of the Chinese intelligentsia. Women from relatively well off families or ones with cultural tradition (*shuxiang shijia*) also received classical education at home. Even Buddhist nuns and prostitutes/songstresses regarded calligraphy as a necessary skill to be possessed. As a result, numerous women were recorded as being skilled in calligraphy. In fact, all the imperial concubines of the emperors were supposed to be versed in calligraphy. Many spouses of court officials or men of letters were documented to be adept calligraphers. One of the most famous among them was the wife of Fang Lin, Lady Gao, who was an expert in stone inscription (Wang 1995:105-116). Wang may have exaggerated the degree of popularity of calligraphy in the whole society in the Tang dynasty, but this does not undermine the merit of his study for showing some understudied calligraphic practices among the womenfolk. In Wei and Jin dynasties, there were many famous female calligraphers, such as Cai Wenji. Other famous female calligraphers in the Jin dynasty were Wang Xizhi's teacher, Wei Furen, and his daughter-in-law, Xie Daoyun (also a famous poetess). Apart from them, Wang Xianzhi's nanny Li Ruyi, and wives of many men of letters were also renowned for their good calligraphy (Pan 1986:8).

[24] Tang emperor Taizong was passionate about Wang Xizhi's calligraphy and searched the whole country for authentic versions of his work. He also ordered court calligraphers to make high-quality copies (*yinghuang moben*) of Wang's work and distributed them among court officials. It is said that he loved Wang's calligraphy so much that he decided to have the original of Wang's legendary *Preface of the Orchid Pavilion* buried with him after his death. Without his promotion, Wang perhaps would not have risen to the status of the "Saint of Calligraphy" in Chinese history.

special classes. An institution called *Hongwen guan* (Institute of Literary Propagation) was established to educate average-ranking officials. Master calligraphers of the time, such as Yu Shinan and Ouyang Xun, were in charge of the teaching. A parallel educational institute, called *Guozijian*, was set up for commoners or sons of lower-ranking officials (beneath the eighth rank). This institution also attracted overseas students from countries such as Japan and Korea, and became a renowned centre of education of the time (Bo 1984:504). The students were taught to write clear and legible regular script. Those who did well were assigned official posts (Chen 1997:161-2). Numerous people climbed to the top of the official ladder solely on their calligraphic merits. Famous examples are Yu Shinan and Liu Gongquan, both celebrated calligraphers of the time and in history.

On the one hand, to learn Chinese calligraphy satisfactorily is to undergo a somatic and moral transformations that makes one more similar to masters. On the other, the quality of prospective administrators (potential members of the governing class) was regularly sifted and guaranteed by the quality of their calligraphy. Having juxtaposed these two conclusions, it becomes clear that under the imperial system of government, recruitment was secured by the moulding of its members' body and morality through the training and discipline of calligraphy. Once you have been shaped by the mould of the masters, you are simultaneously moulded into what is considered fit to govern.

However, imprinting through calligraphy is not forced on powerless individuals in the sense of regimentation. Instead, it is a motivated act with highly desirable social rewards. In imperial times, to become a member of the governing class was the highest honour.[25] The Confucian ideal prescribed one single objective for intellectuals: to become a part of the governing machine so that one's ability and knowledge could be used on and for society. A literary intellectual should take the world's well-being as his own responsibility (*yi tianxia xingwang wei jiren*). Within this tradition, he has reason to believe that the state will, or at least should, utilize his talents. In other words, politics was the highest form of self-realization for literary intellectuals under the Confucian system. Only during 'bad political

[25] As Johnson points out, the dominance of the gentry class "was not only due to the practical realities of wealth and power; it also was legally defined and enforced. Their degrees and elite titles brought specific legal privileges, including exemption from various taxes, special treatment in all phases of legal proceedings, and the right to wear distinctive insignia of rank. Intertwined with these legal privileges were many customary privileges and other benefits of gentry status" (Johnson 1985:53).

times', such as widespread moral decadence or under the rule of foreign governments, did intellectuals avoid a political career. They then kept themselves clean and free from the sullying influence of the political environment (*jieshen zihao*). So, the fact that calligraphy apprentices would humble themselves in the process of learning was also propelled by social rewards - the prospect of a political career, which is at the same time the ultimate self-realization according to Confucian ideas.

What lies behind the learning of Chinese calligraphy is a painstaking humility. It is to give yourself up to the hands of past masters. In this self annihilation, so to speak, the apprentice gradually absorbs the master's whole body-person. And this is done through remarkable discipline to ensure the total assimilation of skills, the bodily movement propensities, and a system of values that are articulated silently through the inked strokes. By merging, physically and spiritually, with the ideal, the apprentice achieves the goal of self-realization. And this is one of the reasons why the notion of regimentation does not exhaust the social import of learning calligraphy. Rather than submissively adopting what is prescribed, the calligraphic learning process is better understood as part of the production of subjectivity. Put another way, as one of the preeminent practices for Chinese men of letters (*wenren*), the training of calligraphy plays a significant role in forming the *wenren* subjectivity and identity. Calligraphic training achieves this goal by gradually shaping the body, and therefore the person, of those who engage in the activity.

5.4 The Subduing and Rectifying of the Body-Person in the Formation of Identity

Another issue that arises here is the formation of subjectivity through regimentation or discipline. Discipline, to Foucault (1979), means subjectification through self-regulation.[26] Writing calligraphy, like rituals, is "one of the significant forms that shapes consciousness and human agency" (Rofel 1992:110; see also Zito 1997).

[26] Foucault is often perceived as arguing that "the docile body" provides a *tabla rasa* for the inscription of power. I am grateful to Stephan Feuchtwang for pointing this alternative view out to me.

5.4.1 Enacting Discipline

The significance of calligraphy as a process of introducing discipline has been noted by a number of analysts (Rofel 1992; Bayne 1998:165; Kraus 1991:7). In fact, as Kraus notes, simply learning to write Chinese characters, with or without a brush, imposes a clear discipline on young Chinese because characters are composed of many strokes and these have to be executed strictly in the correct order (Kraus 1991:7). To write with a brush, i.e., calligraphy, assumes even more discipline. Rofel also mentions that the workers of a silk factory are made to trace Chinese characters - as a form of discipline - in order to increase their efficiency and productivity (Rofel 1992:100). My calligrapher informant Yao once reminisced about his childhood experience of learning calligraphy. He said,

> "My father was a government official (*guan*). I was the oldest son of my father, who was also the oldest son of my grandfather. So he was particularly strict with me. He thought I was too mischievous (*tai pi*) as a little boy, running about energetically all the time. So he made me write calligraphy every day. I was only four years old then. I couldn't even recognise any characters, but he made me copy (*linmo*) masters' works. My assigned task every evening was to grind the ink from a big bowl of water, then write with this ink. The bowl was about 15 cm in diameter and 10 cm in depth. I had to finish this much of water every evening. Can you imagine that? Firstly, I didn't know what I was writing because I couldn't read the characters. Secondly, I was so small that every evening I ended up dozing off while trying to finish the bowl of water. It was an ordeal. In contrast, my father was very lenient to my younger sister. She only had to write a sheet of big characters (*dazi*) and small characters (*xiaozi*) each day. So she became very good at it. She learned it with pleasure, but I learned it with disgust and anger. She writes a hand of extremely beautiful characters (*xiede yishou feichang piaoliangde zi*). Now she is a teacher in Beijing, a specially appointed teacher (*teping de*) simply because of her good hand of *zi*. And she was also asked to make a calligraphy teaching program for television companies. As for me, I started to hate both my father and calligraphy. This was my first encounter with calligraphy. From then, until I was about sixteen, I hardly wrote calligraphy at all."

This is certainly a very interesting case, and I suspect an experience shared by many people.[27] Yao's father apparently thought calligraphy was a good way to make his son behave in a more subdued manner, which was considered appropriate for the future successor and centre of family power (the eldest son of the eldest son). Yao's childhood

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[27] Lu Xun also grew up detesting calligraphy as a result of the painful learning experience he was made to go through as a child (Kraus 1991:56). This hatred for calligraphy later helped to fuel his passion for the eradication of Chinese characters (see chapter 6).

experience is particularly interesting because he was disciplined through daily calligraphic practice before he even learned to read and write. How could this be thought to work, if calligraphy was simply about writing? I suggest it is linked to the performative nature of calligraphic practice.[28] The performative nature of calligraphic practice implies that what matters is the act of writing, rather than its contents. It is the 'doing', even though the doer may not know how or why he does it, that is enough to induce certain desired effects. Yao's father believed that young Yao could be tamed and subdued by 'doing' calligraphy, even though the child himself did not have a clue about what he was doing and would not actively try to calm down and concentrate in preparation for writing (in the manner described earlier). This, of course, further attests to the belief, discussed earlier, in the calming effect of practising calligraphy.

There is one point I want to extract from this example. By enacting the writing of calligraphy, it is believed that the body-person is already undergoing the disciplining process. I mentioned earlier that the instructions on the correct posture of writing repeatedly emphasise the straightness (*zhi*) and uprightness (*zheng*) of the body. A consistent image of weight and stability is evoked by all the postural requirements - upright instead of slanting, erect instead of slouching, solidly planted instead of dangling and drifting. It conveys an unmistakable sense of the rectification of the body in the act of writing, which is consistent with the emphasis on moral rectitude. The posture of calligraphic practise is undoubtably disciplinary. In other words, the practice of calligraphy imposes discipline because the apprentice enacts the calligraphic posture. His/her body enacts the discipline. Discipline is also introduced by the subduing of the body-person. By preparing oneself for the act of writing, such as grinding the ink and raptly concentrating on the thought of writing, one enters a state of calmness (*jing*) - thoughts distilled, concentration enhanced, bodily movements unrelated to the act of writing reduced. The consequence is a gentler bodily temperament characterised by less pronounced bodily movements. This provides a very

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[28] It also reflects the conviction that learning can be achieved by mere high-frequency exposure to the targeted material, unaided by explanation to enhance understanding. It is also the underpinning logic of reciting classic poems and proses found in both the classic and contemporary Chinese education systems. Jing (1996), while discussing the reconstruction of a new Confucian temple by the Kongs in a village in northwest China, mentions that the revising of ceremonial elegy as a part of the reconstruction of the temple ceremony is aided by the classic education the temple managers received in their childhood. He mentions that the key part of the classic education consisted of "memorising ancient poems, classical texts and Confucian quotations. [And] the memorisation skills were honed through recitation drills and long hours of lessons in calligraphy" (1996:105).

interesting point of reference to the process of becoming a proper person through the acquisition of *wen* characteristics (chapter 2). One of the things perceived as differentiating *mingong* from *Kunming ren* is *mingong*'s pronounced bodily movement. Put simply, *mingong*, who are seen to be at the lower end of the continuum of *wen* acquisition, have un-subdued bodily movements, as opposed to *Kunming ren*'s more restrained and subdued bodily temperament. As one moves up the ladder of *wen* acquisition, the body becomes more and more tamed and subdued. In other words, calligraphic training creates a gentler bodily temperament - a measure of achieving *wen* characteristics.

By enacting the procedure of writing with a brush, the body of the apprentice becomes erect, upright, unyielding, calm and subdued. Movements that are not coherent with this desired image of a respectable person are trimmed off from the body-person. In other words, the process of calligraphy as the technique of the body constitutes an important element in Chinese embodiment. That is to say, the techniques of the brush create the type of body-person that is classified as literati, a man of letters or intellectual.

If one only looks at the first half of the learning trajectory, one may think that learning Chinese calligraphy is all about the imprinting of social values on individual bodies. However, the ultimate goal for the learning calligraphy goes beyond the absolute embracing of the body-person of the master. The next step to become a real calligrapher and completing the learning curve is to shed the master's body-person. However, this destination is reached by only a few. So now I shall make a U-turn, back to the learning process.

5.4.2 The Final Stage of Learning: Sloughing the Ghost in the Self

> *Attempts to remake habit tend to treat the body as a "memory" in which are lodged, in mnemonic form, the organizing principles of an embracing context. Scrambling this code - that is, erasing the messages carried in banal physical practice - is a prerequisite for retraining the memory, either to deschool the deviant or to shape new subjects as the bearers of new worlds.*
>
> (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:70)

In the final stage of the learning process, the apprentice no longer overtly consults or imitates any master's work while writing. This is a stage when the apprentice is encouraged to defy the constraints of the masters; to shake loose of their clutching hands. He has already acquired a guiding memory stock, a pool of mental images of characters accumulated over the imitation period. When the coordination between mental images and the motor manipulation is smooth and ripe, he is encouraged to develop his own style. This new writing style involves the creation of a new stock of mental images of characters, and most importantly, the ability to transcribe them into inked traces on paper through the command of muscles. While experimenting with new styles, the apprentice is simultaneously developing new propensities of bodily movement. It is interesting to note that the link between the body and the calligraphic style is reflected in the Chinese term *ti*, which means 'body' as well as 'calligraphic style' (Sturman 1997:7). For example, "*yan ti*" (the calligraphic style of Yan Zhenqing) or "*liu ti*" (calligraphic style of Liu Gongquan) can be seen to indirectly mean Yan or Liu's body respectively. In other words, by shedding the calligraphic style of past masters, one also shrugs off the physical straitjacket that has 'gnawed into his flesh and bones'. In other words, though the shaping of the body is essential to the acquisition of the skill, it has to be followed by its de-shaping. The culmination of calligraphy apprenticeship occurs precisely at the moment when one succeeds in peeling away the acquired somatic coding - the moment when personal style emerges.[29] The de-shaping can be carried very far, even to the verge of madness.[30] However, it is also important to bear in mind that there is a central layer of bodily memory, linked to basic bodily techniques, that should not be scrambled, i.e., brush techniques. This implies that the de-moulding of the body is encouraged only after it has been tamed.

This code-shuffling is also rewarded with social prestige, though perhaps not a classical Confucian political career. People who succeeded in doing so were admired for their integrity and courage in not swimming with the heavy tide of popular taste, not being hedged by popular formats (*buluo sutao*). In fact, eccentrics (*qiren*, or *qishi*), especially

[29] I am aware that there is a historical background and explanation of each rise and fall of calligraphic style. However, since this is not an art-historical study of calligraphy, I do not think it is necessary to venture into a socio-historical explanation of individual styles in this thesis.

[30] Xu Wei's work is a good example. He killed his own wife during a bout of schizophrenia. Nevertheless his calligraphy is celebrated as *busu* (not mediocre, not vulgar). Mi Fu (1051-1107), nicknamed "deranged calligrapher (*shudian*)", is another famous and eccentric calligrapher of the Song dynasty (see Hu 1996; cf. Sturman 1997).

those with unusual talents, have always been a revered category in Chinese history. Their calligraphy, as well as their characters, are regarded as standing erect above the masses (*chuzhong*), rising above mediocrity like a crane standing among a flock of chickens (*heli jichun*), proud and superior, even though they might in reality be a failure in terms of the pursuit of political self-realization. Put another way, the society as a whole is harnessed by this act of subversion, which is why it is rewarded by an alternative type of positive evaluation. In this sense, the development of individual styles can be understood as the "encapsulated oppositional/subversive practice", to borrow Gell's words. That is, it is prescribed in the existing order of things to develop and accommodate such subversion to the authority. Yet the force of subversion will later be restrained and utilized as a constructive force to the existing structure of order (Gell 1993:62-63). Chinese calligraphy as a learning process incorporates a built-in imprinting and a built-in erasing program for the apprentice's body.

The reader may have noticed that there is an inherent paradox lurking beneath two main points I have expounded: the idea that handwriting reveals the personhood/self of the person, and that the learning of calligraphy is fundamentally the copying of the master's body-person. In other words, the learning of calligraphy involves copying the handwriting of another person, thereby adopting his/her personality (or self) in one's own handwriting. If the point is conceded, then the paradox becomes obvious: How can handwriting be conceived as revelatory of one's personhood/self while the learning of this handwriting is essentially the adopting of the personhood/self of another person? The following discussion is an attempt to resolve this paradox.

5.5 Calligraphic Paradox as the Locus of Social Manipulation

In order to understand how a set of two contradictory ideas coexist, both of which claim paramount importance in the understanding of handwriting/calligraphy, we have to look at further examples for potential explanation. I commence by turning to the phenomena of calligraphic fashion.

5.5.1 Calligraphic Fashion

I mentioned earlier that calligraphic merits facilitated social climbing. However, it would be rash to jump to the conclusion that everyone who wrote good calligraphy benefited from it in their pursuit for social advancement. There are plenty of counter-examples of those who spent decades perfecting their writing, but to no avail in terms of promoting their positions. One complained that "After fifteen years of effort on brush and ink stone (*biyangong*), I am still mired in the middle of poverty" (Wang 1995:174). It would also be wrong to think that the institutionalised recruitment of officials according to their calligraphic skills was approved of by everybody. In fact, it was frowned upon by many people, such as the great Song dynasty calligrapher Mi Fu. *Ganlu shufa*, calligraphy that brought wealth and official posts, was thought by some to have brought about the demise of artistic imagination in calligraphy in the centuries following Tang. One immediate consequence of *ganlu shufa* was the popularity of official-style calligraphy, highly dependent on the subjective taste of the emperors or powerful high officials, such as the famous *taige ti* of the Ming dynasty (Chen 1997:94-56) or the *guange ti* of Qing dynasty (Chen 1997:105-6). A famous example of this is linked to the Qing emperor Kangxi, who was a fan of the calligraphy of Dong Chichang (1555-1636, late Ming), and his successor emperor Qianlong was particularly fond of Zhao Mengfu's calligraphy. A normalised official style *guange ti*, characterised by its rigid form and dark and glossy inking, was formed based on both Dong and Zhao's calligraphy. As a result, people started to imitate the calligraphic style preferred by the emperors. The phenomena of calligraphic fashion also exists in contemporary China. According to my informant, a calligraphy aficionado, the most fashionable calligraphic style at present is "to combine running script (*xingshu*) with *weibei*, that is, to incorporate the brush techniques of *weibei* in running script."

The impact of fashion on calligraphic style is well illustrated by the example of Zheng Banqiao (1693-1765, Qing), as I was told by my calligrapher informant Yao.

> "The reality is that one wrote what appealed to the emperor of the time. Zhao Mengfu's *zi* didn't enjoy a very high status until Qianlong emperor promoted his *zi*. His *zi* then became highly revered. If your *zi* was not in the mainstream style (*buruliu*), it wouldn't work. That is to say, if your *zi* didn't appeal to the taste of the examiners, which was also what the emperor liked, then your political prospects would not be bright. Therefore, a style called *"guange ti"* was formed in line with the emperor's taste. If the man of letter couldn't write well in *guange ti*, then he would not move into the main

> stream of officialdom. Zheng Banqiao was a *jinshi* (a successful candidate in the highest imperial examination), and once worked as an academician (*daxueshi*). His *guange ti* was very well written. But soon after he left the official post, his *zi* also became something like jumbled stones paving the stairs (*luanshi pujie*).[31]"

Even Yan Zhenqing (709-780), who remains one of the leading lights of Chinese calligraphy, underwent a stylistic change soon after he left the capital Changan for the provinces. "During his years as an examination student and government official in the capital, he learned Wang Xizhi-style of regular script taught at the imperial academy, mastery of which was necessary for the imperial examinations [as mentioned earlier]. This training produced the sort of calligraphy expected at the court of Emperor Xuanzong: characters are tightly composed, strokes are vibrantly modulated, and stroke ends are crisply pointed." Two years after his departure from the capital, he began to "slough the piquancy" associated with the court style. His regular script became plainer and more severe - modulation in the stroke thickness reduced and sharp stroke ends blunted (McNair 1998:26).[32] The style is conventionally regarded as less flattering, less artificial and not striving for effect, which is consistent with Yan's reputation of righteousness and Confucian virtues.

The implication of this phenomena of calligraphic fashion is that one's handwriting can be feigned for instrumental reasons, such as social climbing, or adopted to simply swim with the calligraphic tide. This is of immense significance in my attempt to provide an explanation for the aforementioned paradox, i.e., how can handwriting be conceived as revelatory of one's personhood/self while its learning process is essentially the adoption of the personhood/self of another person? I suggest that these contradictory ideas about calligraphy as handwriting are precisely the source for social manipulation revolving around calligraphy/handwriting.

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[31] Zheng Banqiao (1693-1765) was appointed to Shandong as a county magistrate. He was thought to be a good official who genuinely cared about the welfare of the people. He was removed from the post after he angered his boss by lavishing resources in the victims of a famine. The famous metaphor my informant used to describe Zheng's individual style depicts his eccentric calligraphic composition. It is characterised by the well balanced and interlocking alternation between dense and sparse, relaxed and taut, lurching, jagged and unrestrained strokes (Lan & Zheng 1994;247-250).

[32] Yan's later style has more affinity to a more rustic and archaic provincial style, which can be distinguished from the crisp and mannered metropolitan style of the capital Changan. The provincial style of Yan's time was also in line with the calligraphy of Yan's great-uncle, Yin Zhongrong, a noted calligrapher of his time. Therefore Yan's change of manner can be explained by both the clan identification and a shift towards a more naïve and unmannered provincial influence (McNair 1998:26-33).

We are dealing with two convictions here. Conviction A states that calligraphy as handwriting reveals the person/self, including his/her moral quality. Conviction B states that the learning of calligraphy is to copy the master's person/self. If both of these convictions are true, then, the existence of calligraphic fashion would imply that everyone who successfully follow the fashionable master reveals the same (or at least similar) person/self. This is obviously not true, therefore at least one of the two convictions is wrong if one reasons logically. However, they are both true in the belief system. So how does one get out of this trap? I suggest that the logical tension between Conviction A and Conviction B is exactly what opens up the arena for social manipulation through the assessment of calligraphy as handwriting. The two sets of convictions may be contradictory on the logical level, they nevertheless cooperate to generate a lush topography of social calligraphy on the practical one. The contradiction only exists when both convictions are placed side by side on the same (logical) level. Once they are set free into the practical realm of instrumentality, in which these two convictions are rarely juxtaposed, one can then take advantage of them and use them to advance one's own interests in the social world. In fact, this can probably explain most contradictions one finds within a society/culture. Logical paradox often becomes the swamp - being rich and malleable - of social manipulation. Without this paradox, there would be little point in tirelessly practising and perfecting handwriting.

So far, I have focused on the place of writing in the cultural construct, in both the conceptual and somatic sense, of Chinese personhood. This raises a further question: Is the embeddedness of writing in Chinese a result of pure cultural construct? Or does it in some way reflect the characteristics of the writing *per se*? Or is it in fact the result of a combination of the two? This question is of vital importance because it underlies one of the most widespread, as well as obstinate, popular conceptions of writing in China. The following chapter is an attempt to untangle sentiments towards writing.

6. Ideograms and Knowledge: A Ramification of Goody's Literacy Thesis

The relationship between the Chinese people and their writing is intriguingly intricate. Writing bestirs strong emotions among the Chinese. This is partly because that it has always, as I have tried to show, constituted an essential element of 'Chineseness'. As a result, both political nationalism and cultural iconoclasm find outlets through writing, especially in the upheavals of modern Chinese history (Tu 1994). The strong sentiments attached to written characters are not the result of a pure cultural construct. Instead, they can be explained in part by the conceived characteristics of written characters. In this chapter, I will explore the issue by examining one ramification of a myriad discussions raised by Goody's literacy thesis. This is the one centred around the relationship between writing and knowledge pursued by Bloch in the article "Literacy and Enlightenment". From a discussion of Bloch's argument, I shall proceed to identify one of the fundamental reasons behind the Chinese quasi-religious reverence towards writing and calligraphy. Bloch's important argument is chosen to set the track for advancing my own argument because it contains, I believe, some misconceptions about so-called idiographic writing, such as written Chinese.

6.1 Characters as the Base of Knowledge?

6.1.1 Goody's Literacy Thesis

In an attempt to show the fallacies of Goody's argument on the crucial impact of literacy on the nature of knowledge in society, Bloch used examples from Madagascar and Japan - each employed to address different theoretical issues - to subvert Goody's literacy thesis from its intellectual roots (Bloch 1989). Bloch points out that the roots of Goody's theory can be traced back to the Enlightenment, which states that knowledge is independent from, yet transmitted through systems of communication. According to Bloch, Goody's idea that literacy brings about a sharp divide in the nature of knowledge in society, which in turn results in political liberation, is based on the European folk view of the relationship between

knowledge, speech and writing. This view assumes that writing fixes fleeting and fluid speech, therefore leading to critical evaluative knowledge that potentially challenges political authority. Since knowledge and systems of communication are considered independent from one another, the better the means of communication, the more readily accessible the true knowledge is. Based on this assumption, ideograms are considered an inferior script because they get in the way too much to be an effective means of communication and knowledge transmission. As we shall see later, this is also a view shared by many modern Chinese thinkers endorsing script reform. There are other significant points made by Bloch against Goody's argument.[1] However, I am only concerned here with the one he draws from the example of Japanese ideograms.

6.1.2 Bloch's Formulation of Ideograms as a Response to Goody's Thesis

To present a different, but equally valid, folk view of the relationship between knowledge, writing and speech from the one endorsed by Goody, Bloch turns to Japanese ideograms as a system of writing.

> "For the Japanese, the characters are the base of knowledge and the spoken is a poor refraction of this base." (Bloch 1989:30)
>
> "The nature of ideogram is not as units of sound but as units of knowledge." (Bloch 1989:32)

In other words, as Bloch presents it, for the Japanese the characters themselves are the information, instead of referring to information outside themselves, such as speech or sound. Therefore, Goody's assumption that "the ideograms might obscure the dissemination of meaning" is absurd in the Japanese way of looking at things (ibid.:33). From the perspective of idiographic writing, written characters are far closer to the origin of knowledge than speech. Therefore, ideograms cannot possibly obscure the dissemination of meaning. And, if there is something that obstructs the flow of knowledge from written characters to the reader, it would be the ignorance of the reader which prevents him from grasping the full meaning so obviously displayed in characters. This also explains why "the Japanese are endlessly commenting on the inadequacies of their spoken language to express deep knowledge and they often gleefully point out how it is unfortunately full of homonyms"

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[1] For instance, he shows with the Malagasy example that literacy does not bring about knowledge that is unrelated to social conditions.

(ibid.:30).

In order to offer a non-Western view of knowledge and communication, Bloch presents an exotic picture of a system of writing in which script goes directly to meaning, bypassing sound or speech. One thing that Bloch did not make explicit in his article is this: The Japanese do not apply what he calls "the folk view" of the relationship between knowledge and communication to the two perfectly efficient phonetic writing systems they have had for centuries, side by side with ideograms of Chinese origin. In other words, the Japanese folk model is only applicable to the idiographic writing system. So, the origin of this folk understanding should be traced back to the characteristics of the idiographic writing. It also implies that the Japanese may have a very similar idea about the writing/knowledge relationship as the Europeans do when it comes to their phonetic writing systems. This point cannot be verified in this chapter, but it helps to trim down the potentially complex problematic to a manageable core, i.e., ideograms. In this chapter, I shall show that the version of the speech-writing-knowledge relationship, presented by Bloch, is flawed. By using material from linguistics, I will show that the myth of ideogram is one of the major foundations of the quasi-religious reverence for written characters and calligraphy for the Chinese.

6.1.3 Implication of Idiographic Writing

So what are the characteristics of idiographic writing that support such a view of the relationship between knowledge and writing? To answer this question, I shall return to Chinese material, since Japanese ideograms originate from Chinese script.

What is the nature of Chinese ideograms? In The Oxford Dictionary, the term 'ideogram' is defined as "a character symbolizing the idea of a thing without indicating the sequence of sounds in its name." Chaves notes, "Ever since Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), in his famous essay, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, and Ezra Pound called the attention of Westerners to the "pictorial qualities of Chinese characters", there has been a continuing fascination with this matter among poets and others in the West" (Chaves 1977:212). Eighteen-century missionary accounts of Chinese writing are still widely popular among both laymen and academics.

"[Chinese characters are composed of] symbols and images which speak to the mind through the eyes - images for palpable things, symbols for mental ones. Images and symbols which are not tied to any sound and can be read in all languages." (by Father J. J. M. Amiot, quoted by De Francis 1984:135)

In the same vein, DuPonceau summarised Chinese writing as "an ocular method of communicating ideas, entirely independent of speech, and which, without the invention of words, conveys ideas through the sense of vision directly to the mind. Hence it is called idiographic, in contradiction from the phonographic or alphabetical system of writing" (DeFrancis 1984:145-6). This view is generally shared by the Chinese themselves. I once had a conversation with my informant, the one who worked for a provincial newspaper, on the difference between Western and Chinese writing.

He: I think the characteristics of Chinese characters are that they are concise, and that they are also different in terms of meaning and implication (*hanyi*).

I: What do you mean by *hanyi*?

He: For example, for Chinese characters, each one of them normally has many different meanings (*yizi duoyi*). For example, *chao* (lit. facing towards) and *zhao* (lit. sunrise or morning sun) are the same character (with different pronunciation in this case). I think that polysemy (*yizi duoyi*) is the most representative of all the characteristics of Chinese characters.

I: But English words often have many meanings too, for example, bank and bear.

He: You are right. So maybe one word with multiple meanings is the common characteristic of all languages. But from spelling language (*pinyin wenzi*), you cannot know what it means by simply looking at them (*yikan jiu xiangdao*). By contrast, you can do that with Chinese characters. For example, if what you've learned is simplified characters (*jianhua zi*), you can guess what complex characters mean even though you are never taught to read them. For most Chinese characters, you can guess what they mean by just looking at them (*kan jiu keyi caidao shi sheme yisi*). So basically, because Chinese characters are mostly pictograph writing (*xiangxing zi*), they have gradually developed, evolved and refined (*yanbian yu jinlian*) from pictures (*tuhua*), so you can guess what they mean by simply looking at them.

Although his first response to the characteristic of Chinese characters is their polysemy, he immediately resorted to the pictograph origin of Chinese characters for an alternative explanation once he realised that polysemy was not restricted to the Chinese written language. He was not the only person I spoke to in the field who believed that you could guess, and very often correctly, what a character meant simply by looking at it because Chinese characters were pictographs (*xiangxing zi*) or evolved from pictographs.

In fact, in one of the numerous after-dinner chats I had with his family, his father initiated a casual discussion on the difference between written Chinese and written English. He thoroughly embraced the pictograph/ideograph[2] idea about Chinese written words and thought of it as the paramount difference between the two systems of writing. "You cannot possibly get any idea of what an English word means by looking at how it is written.", said his father. The unuttered condition of this conviction is, of course, that one has already been introduced and initiated to Chinese writing.

In this system, written characters are regarded as the base of knowledge as described by Bloch. If Goody is right in that, as Bloch points out, systems of communication are evaluated in terms of their transparency so that the light of knowledge can shine through (Bloch 1984:29), the idea about idiographic writing depicted here should be the most transparent of all. But the question is: Does Chinese/Japanese idiographic writing really directly reflects ideas and knowledge as they are believed to? What if the answer is 'No'? In that case, Bloch's argument against Goody can no longer be sustained.

6.1.4 The Myth of Ideogram as the Base of Knowledge

The claim that Chinese script has nothing to do with sound and solely reflects ideas is unwarranted. Ninety percent of Chinese characters contain a phonetic code. Chinese characters are definitely not ocular only, they are also acoustic. In other words, it is not a system of writing composed of visual and meaningful symbols alone, as it is often believed to be. The fact is well recognised by Sinologists and linguists, thanks to the effort of people such as DeFrancis, but often ignored by many. Even school children are taught about the six principles of the formation of Chinese characters (*liushu*).[3] Among the six principles, the form-and-sound principle (*xingsheng*) and the phonetic loan principle (*jiajie*) generate by far the majority of Chinese characters still in use today. Characters constructed according to both of these principles have an unmistakable phonetic element. By the form-and-sound

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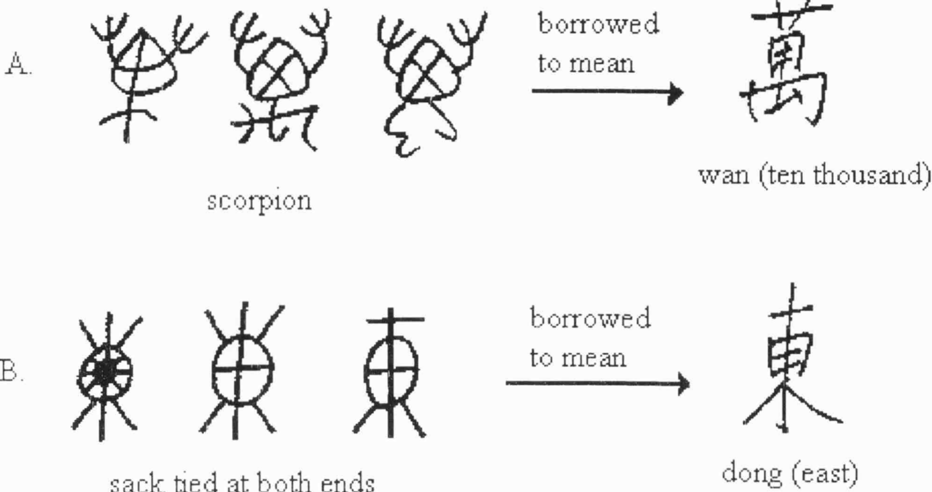
[2] Average Chinese tend not to differentiate between pictograph (*xiangxing zi*) and ideograph (*biaoyi zi*). They generally use the two terms interchangeably.

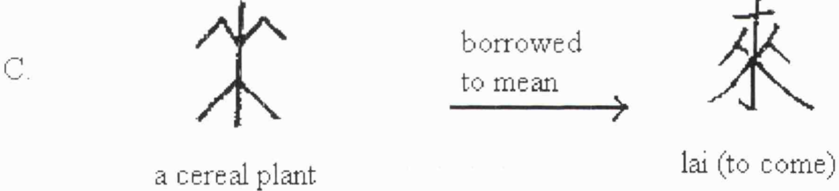
[3] They are sometimes called the six categories of Chinese characters. Characters formed by one principle belong to that category. These principles are: pictographic principle (*xiangxing*), simple indicative principle (*zhishi*), compound indicative principle (*huiyi*), semantic-phonetic principle (or called form-and-sound principle, *xingsheng*), phonetic loan principle (*jiajie*) and derived characters (transferable meaning, *zhuanzhu*) (Rohan & Needham 1978; DeFrancis 1984). The translation of the terms adopted here is from DeFrancis (1984:79-81). The first four principles are based on the composition of characters, whereas the last two on their usage. For a summary of debates on related theories, see Zhan 1994.

principle, different words that are pronounced in similar ways and represented by the same character are further differentiated by adding a semantic element (radical) to the shared phonetic element to form new characters. The semantic element is 'the form' in the new character, and the homophone part becomes its 'sound' element. And, by the 'phonetic loan principle', a pictograph can be borrowed to mean a homophonous word, thereby creating totally unrelated multiple meanings for a character (Rohan 1978:5-14; Pan 1986; Zhan 1994; Dong 1993). The only association between these different meanings is the sound. Only a tiny fraction of Chinese characters are actually derived from pictographs. Put another way, the most effective technique to create Chinese characters is the principle of rebus, as in most other languages (Hannas 1997:102). See Fig. 6.1. It is clear that Chinese written characters, in their formation, are as much a reflection of ideas (in the case of pictographs, and in both simple and compound indicative characters) as sound. As the spoken language changes over time, the supposedly phonetic components become, more than often, detached from the modern pronunciations because the phonetic element has already adopted a different sound. Therefore, they often do not appear phonetically relevant to modern users. This may have contributed to the popular misunderstanding. In the case of Japanese ideograms, the link between sound and the script is weakened even further by the fact that these characters are pronounced in an entirely different way from their Chinese origin. Defective it may be, but the phonetic characteristic of written characters is undeniable.

The implication of the phonetic basis of Chinese written characters is that a lot of them do not actually reveal ideas and knowledge directly through their visual forms as they are believed to. That is to say, even within the form of characters we can find the "disruptive intermediacy of sound", to paraphrase Bloch (1989:33). The idea that characters form the solid base of knowledge is therefore nothing more than a myth, albeit a very powerful one. However, it is important not to misunderstand my argument. I do not suggest that written characters do not reflect ideas at all without the intermediary of sound and speech. What I reject is the assumption that <u>all</u> written characters are pure ideograms, therefore, referring directly to meaning. It is an extremely complex matter whether a specific character is independent from the influence of sound (cf. Zhan 1994; Pan 1986). This is beyond the concerns of this paper. The problem with the ideogram myth is that it treats all characters as a whole and as unmediated by sound. This is what I argue to be flawed.



The picture of a sack tied at both ends is borrowed to indicate the direction East (dong) because of the similarity of pronunciation (Dong 1993).



The character lai (to come) originally meant a cereal plant (Ronan & Needham (1978:10).

Fig. 6.1 The rebus technique.

Now I shall proceed to examine another ramification of Bloch's argument: "If characters are indeed the base of knowledge, a reduction of the number of ideograms or simplification of them will be a reduction in knowledge." The successful script reform of character simplification in modern China is an ideal example to draw upon for a discussion on this particular deduction from the ideogram myth.

6.2 The Modern Script Reform in China: A Historical Account

Having undergone several major script reforms through history, the nature and quantity of knowledge, as Bloch predicted, may have changed accordingly. However, this is an utterly unverifiable statement as it stands. First of all, we are not sure what he meant by a reduction of knowledge. Is it the number of characters that determines the 'quantity of knowledge' because they are believed to be the repository of knowledge? Would characters invented in the depths of history in a totally different social environment carry the same knowledge now as they once did? Would a simplification of characters resulting in a reduction of strokes change the nature or the quantity of knowledge? All these are potential questions germinating from the statement "any reduction of the number of ideograms is a reduction in knowledge" (Bloch 1989:33). Frankly, it is beyond my knowledge to answer all these questions. However, it seems of particular relevance when it comes to the significance of the script reform in twentieth-century China. Hopefully, an examination of the modern script reform will shed some light on the problematic I raise here.

6.2.1 A Brief History of the Script Reform

<u>The Propeller of the Reform</u>

Modern script reform in China started as a progressive urge to eradicate characters all together in order to raise literacy rates. It was also coupled with the rhetoric of modernisation, that is, to replace characters with a more efficient alphabetic writing to meet the demand of modern technology and efficiency. It was with the intent to liberate China entirely from the shackles of monosyllabic characters that the debates were set under way. To the Leftist writer Lu Xun, one of the most prominent and ardent advocates of the script reform, Chinese characters were an efficient instrument in the hand of the privileged to keep the public in ignorance. He believed that the outrageous inaccessibility of characters ensured that the masses held both writing and the gentry in respect. "Not only the toiling masses have no spare time and opportunity to learn such a difficult writing, but even the privileged sometimes fail to master the written language after decades of learning... Therefore, Chinese characters are the tuberculosis of the body of the toiling masses. The germs are lurking inside. If they are not eradicated, the only possible consequence is death" (Lu 1934). To the reformers, China's survival in the modern world depended on getting rid of characters. In consequence, it was regarded necessary to abolish Chinese characters altogether and replace

them with an alphabetic system that closely reflected speech so that the "toiling masses" would have a better chance of literacy.

Different Plans[4]

Since the beginning of the century, many different experiments have been implemented to achieve the goal of a revolution in the writing system.[5] In the Republican period, a system of symbols (*zhuyin zimu* or *zhuyin fuhao*, Phonetic Alphabets or Phonetic Symbols) derived from the traditional script was employed to represent the standard pronunciation of traditional characters. It was promulgated in 1918 and introduced in primary schools in 1920. This was not an autonomous system of writing, but an adjunct to the traditional script. Its main function was to aid Mandarin pronunciation.[6] In 1926, a system of alphabetic writing called *Guoyeu Romatsyh* (G.R.) (*guoyu luomazi*, National Language Romanization) was created by a group of distinguished linguists and officially promulgated by the Ministry of Education as a second form of phonetic script in 1928. It employed a complicated system of tonal spelling to indicate different tones by variations in spelling, rather than diacritical marks written above vowels. It was the first Chinese system of Latinization which obtained government approval, but it failed to be a practical substitute for characters because it was regarded as too complicated and lacked a popular base of support. In the thirties, another system of alphabetic writing Latinized New Writing (*latinhua sin wenz*) was developed by a group of Chinese and Russian linguists based on a cross section of northern dialects of Chinese immigrants living in the Soviet Far East. In other words, it was based on everyday spoken language and therefore had the flavour of 'streets and lanes' [*jietou xiangwei*, which implies the domain of the average public as against the privileged few], to paraphrase Lu Xun (1994:840). It quickly attracted a large number of supporters, especially Leftist intellectuals, such as Lu Xun, Mao Zedong, Mao Dun (a celebrated writer) and Guo Moruo (once the head of the Academy of Sciences in

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[4] In the following discussion, I deliberately leave out the debates on the complication of regionalects and their place in the writing reform, for it is of no immediate relevance to the argument presented in this paper. For more information on the topic, see DeFrancis 1984; Ramsey 1987; Norman 1988; and Seybolt & Chiang 1979.

[5] Before the twentieth century, the missionaries created a few different systems of Romanised Chinese to facilitate educating the public to read religious texts. The activities resulted in "the publication of millions of religious tracts and other materials" (DeFrancis, 1984:241-242).

[6] The system remains actively used in Taiwan until now, although recently there have been plans to change official English spelling into the *pinyin* system.

Communist China and a celebrated scholar, cf. chapter 1). However, it was controversial for two major reasons. Firstly, it lacked tonal markings, thereby resulting in serious ambiguity.[7] Secondly, it was used in the creation of separate alphabetic scripts for various regionalects, thereby dividing the country into a large number of linguistic units which were regarded a threat to the unity of the nation.

Revolutionary Passion Phasing Out

All these efforts were phased out soon after the Communist Government consolidated power. In 1950, Mao made a policy 'U' turn and decided that reform should start from the simplification of characters instead of an outright break with the past. Instead of replacing characters for alphabetic writing, simplification of characters became, allegedly, the transitional stage that would prepare people for the eventual changeover to alphabetic writing in the distant future. In 1956, the first official list of simplified characters (*diyi pi*, the first batch) was published.[8] Two years later, the *pinyin* spelling scheme was promulgated as an auxiliary aid to the simplified characters and a tool for spreading the use of the nationwide official spoken language (*putonghua,* normally referred to as Mandarin in English). Support for the traditional characters grew stronger. The linguistic revolutionary wheel finally lost momentum.

In 1977, a new list of simplified characters (the second batch, *dier pi*) was drafted and published on a trial basis. But because it contained unfamiliar abbreviations, unlike the earlier batch, it was strongly opposed and was therefore quietly withdrawn from use in 1978 (DeFrancis 1984:261). I asked my informant who worked for a provincial newspaper why the second batch of simplified characters was abandoned in the end. He told me,

"Because these characters are badly simplified (*luan jianhua*). After

[7] Chinese is a monosyllabic and tonal language (five tones in total in Mandarin). It is characterised by a great scarcity of syllabic forms and consequently a number of homonyms or words of the same sound. One sound with one tone may mean many different words, each of which has a distinct written form (written character). Take contemporary Mandarin pronunciation for example, the sound *bi* with the fourth tone refers to fifty-nine different words, each of which has different written form and meaning from others. The sound *yi* with the fourth tone refers to seventy-one words and *yu* with the fourth tone to sixty words. (The exact figures may vary from dictionary to dictionary depending on the different choice of some obscure characters.)

[8] This is based on the first official Table of Simplified Characters list issued in 1935 by the Nationalist government. It came as a response to the "breakdown of traditional thought and institutions under the pressure of Western demands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Seybolt & Chiang 1979:9).

simplification, they become totally meaningless (*wanquan wu yiyi*) (Fig. 6.2). They are the type of characters in the second batch. Now, shop signs with unofficial or unnormalised characters (*bu guifan zi*) on them have to be taken off. For example, *jiaju* (furniture), *ju* should be written without the *ren* radical. Shop signs with the wrong *ju* character are being dismantled."

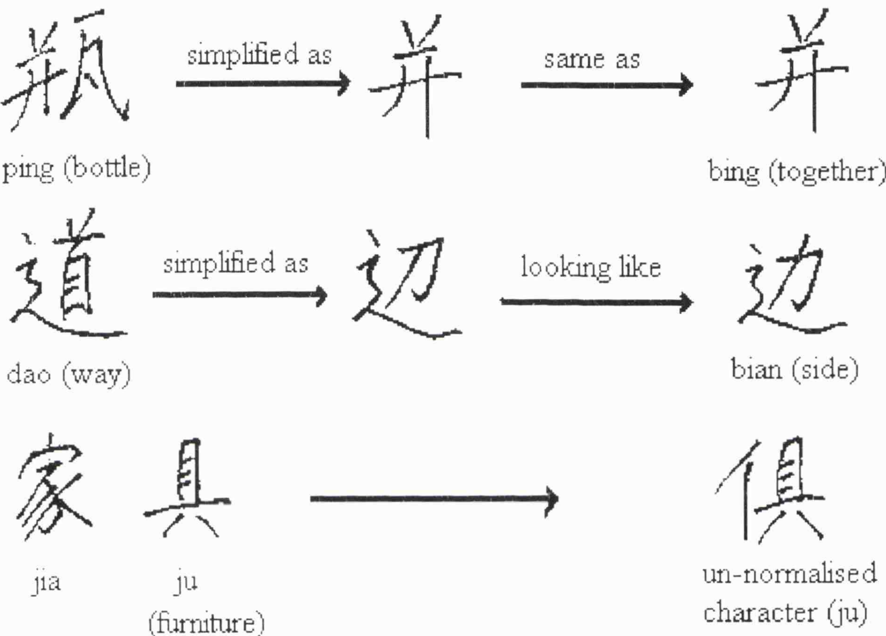

Fig. 6.2 Un-normalised character simplification.

According to him and many others, confusion and meaninglessness are the major reasons for the abandoning of the second batch of simplified characters. Though officially abandoned, they survive in the unofficial domain, despite official efforts to banish them. The same informant also told me,

"Even now, some journalists still use simplified characters from the second batch. But these are all changed into regulated or normalised characters (*guifan zi*) before their articles went to print. A lot of un-normalised characters I've seen are from the second batch. There are still some people using simplified characters from the second batch. But not too many people do that. They tend to use them in private only. Though not officially recognised, most people can recognise these unnormalised characters anyway."

6.2.2 Characters New and Old: Sources of Simplified Characters

What are the sources of the officially approved simplified characters? It is an interesting question because it can potentially throw light on some of the issues tackled in this chapter. Generally speaking, there are three major sources of inspiration for official simplified characters. All of them aim at reducing the strokes of characters so that they are, in theory, easier to learn.

(a.) The first source is to go off the beaten track to search for abbreviations of characters. That is to say, to dig out vulgar characters (*suzi*) and archaic variant forms with fewer strokes that were in use centuries ago but not at the time when the reform took place. Vulgar characters, as against correct characters (*zhengzi*, prescribed standard form), are those 'which have come from base people' and are used among the public but unapproved of officially. These were scattered in unofficial documents or texts such as librettos for popular dramas, old prints of colloquial novels, shop account books and medical prescriptions. They were introduced into the mainstream by the script reform and became officially approved characters. (b.) The second source is shorthand or the cursive-script calligraphy (*caoshu*) and its extension. This method of simplification often involves leaving off parts of the original characters or using a single stroke or simpler combination to stand for a more complex element. It usually amounts to simpler graphs that look somewhat like shorthand version of their complex counterparts. (c.) The third and the most common technique was to substitute a complex element with a simple character with pronunciation that suggested the sound (Ramsey 1987:149). Apart from reducing the strokes of characters, the reduction in the number of characters was also achieved by elimination of graphic distinction. Complex characters are discarded and replaced by those simpler in form and identical in sound. Thereby the meaning of a simpler graph is extended to include those originally carried by a more complex graph. This method is, in effect, an application of a generative principle of traditional Chinese characters, that is, the phonetic loan principle, as mentioned earlier (Fig. 6.3).

	complex characters	simplified characters	characters used as phonetic loan
xia (to frighten)	嚇	吓	下 (xia)
ren (to recognise)	認	认	人 (ren)
qian (to move)	遷	迁	千 (qian)

Fig. 6.3 The phonetic loan principle in character simplification.

What my informant called "badly simplified characters (*luan jianhua*)" also belong to this category. Two interesting points can be drawn from this material. Firstly, script reform was, by no means, totally progressive in terms of the age of characters adopted. Many antiquated characters were resurrected and reinvigorated with modern spirit. What was once lost was returned on the central stage of history. Secondly, the script simplification, as is clearly manifested, was a two-track process. One track was followed by linguists and experts of related fields who invented/adopted new characters according to the philological suitability; while the other was pursued by the general public who created "vulgar characters". While creativity of the first type often had official support; that of the second track needed no such helping hand to spread. It is the tension between the two tracks that I turn to next.

6.2.3 *Cang Jie* Was the Masses and the Masses are *Cang Jie*

In the most widespread myth on the creation of Chinese characters, the four-eyed demi-God *Cang Jie* created writing after intensively observing the natural world, its forms and movements (cf. Chaves 1977). *Cang Jie* has always been regarded as the creator of Chinese writing. In the middle of the socialist fervour of returning power to the hands of the masses, *Cang Jie*'s creativity in the myth was stripped away and returned to the people. The *Cang Jie* myth was revised as an example of "great man" history, "a theoretical base for reactionary cultural absolutism intimately tied to the thought of Confucius and Mencius and

designed to keep the masses in ignorance."[9] From this point of view, the inclusion of vulgar characters into the mainstream of writing was totally congruent with the socialist spirit of the time.

But the problem remains: the vulgar characters on the official list were already sifted by experts after rigorous research for suitability. In other words, they were not only in touch with the spirit of the people but were also philologically sound. What about the creative urge already ignited among the masses? The fact is, people were and are still creating their own simplified characters. This caused a lot of chagrin among linguistic purists.

> "Since the simplified characters were promulgated by official decree, people who hold different opinions have not dared to mention them again. At the same time people have misunderstood the purpose of the decree; they thought that because the proclamations were made batch by batch, it was necessary to simplify faster and faster. In their struggle to be first, they have arbitrarily reduced the number of strokes in characters; people throughout the entire country have unwittingly succumbed to the "madness of writing wrong characters." (Wang 1957:13)

Previously disparaged as 'vulgar', if not 'wrong', arbitrarily created new characters were, at the outset of the reform in 1958, regarded as a natural phenomena of history, but in need of official control so that confusion could be avoided. There was an obvious tug of war between the irrepressible creativity of the public and the more prudent and conservative forces defending legitimate written characters. However, the divide was not a clear-cut one between the masses and elites. In order not to offend the Marxist spirit of the time, the official policy was to enforce the legitimate simplified characters in announcements or notes for everyone to read, as well as in printed documents; while space was allowed for individual creativity to invent new characters in personal correspondence.[10]

Modern script reform is a cogent demonstration of how the two tracks of script development interacted. The vulgar and the illegitimate was eventually absorbed into the standard and the legitimate by the approval of experts. The former category, often motivated

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[9] *Cang Jie jiu shi qunzhong, qunzhong jiu shi Cang Jie*, by the special language unit, Nanking University Language Department. In *Guangming Ribao*, January 10, 1974, collected in Seybolt & Chiang, 1979.

[10] Zhou Enlai, January 1958, 'The immediate tasks in writing reform' (*Dangqian wenzi gaige de renwu*), a speech delivered at the National Political consultative Conference. In Seybolt & Chiang, 1979:228-243.

by practical convenience, shows a larger degree of intimacy with sound. The way people speak is used as a shortcut to create characters that are easier to remember and write. However, there is also an unmistakable ongoing resistance to the contamination of the ever-expanding stock of new characters created out of convenience. In fact, this new stock of characters is still labelled by some as "vulgar characters" four decades after the first official list of standard simplified characters was promulgated and enforced. There is obviously a strong counter-current against script reform in China nowadays. In a way, my informant also expressed disdain for "badly simplified characters (*luan jianhua*)". A retired cadre (and a calligraphy aficionado) dismissed the idea of script reform without hesitation. He told me,

> "Nowadays, nobody talks about demolishing (*feichu*) Chinese characters. Chinese characters often have the same sound, if you replace them with *pinyin* spelling, you get confused with which meaning the sound really means. So it obviously won't work."

The implication of this material is: If people are allowed to invent their own written characters, then obviously, the relationship between the form of written characters and deep knowledge as described by Bloch is jeopardized. Since the form can be created relatively freely, there is apparently no loyalty and exclusiveness between written form and the knowledge it is supposed to contain.

6.2.4 Emphasising the Phonetic Component

If the modern script reform movement can be understood as an attempt to break loose from the 'burden and shackles' of ideograms, then the key to this defiant move is the establishment of an intimate relationship between writing and speech/sound. Thereby writing becomes a more straightforward reflection of speech. Then one need not grapple with a disparate form of expression, which is demanded by learning Chinese characters. In spite of the failure to implement an entirely alphabetic writing, the simplification of characters does indeed achieve the same goal on a much more meagre scale, even though the original goal of significantly raising literacy rates may not have been accomplished.

The phonetic element of Chinese characters, as pointed out earlier, was further enhanced in many simplified characters by using homonymic elements to replace more complicated graphs. This is also the major method employed by the general public to create their own simplified characters, since it does not involve the expertise demanded by other

methods. In the process of writing, if people fail to reproduce an element with complicated strokes, they just substitute it with a simpler one according to the pronunciation of the character. Phonetic borrowing is a very powerful way of expanding the number of simplified characters thanks to the large number of homophones in Chinese. Some argued that it should be widely used to continue character simplification (Lin 1973). Although failing to bring about a complete switch to an alphabetic system of writing, the character simplification reform, by emphasising the phonetic components of characters, actually made Chinese writing an even more phonetic system. This is regardless of the potential confusion it may engender.

6.2.5 What Do People Think of the Script Reform Nowadays?

So far I have tried to present a picture of modern script reform, including a brief history. But what do people think of simplified characters nowadays, especially people too young to have been caught in the rhetoric of the proletariat movement? What do people think about further simplification of existing written characters? What are the sentiments involved when they compare unsimplified and simplified characters? I mentioned earlier that there is a growing, perhaps overwhelming some would say, disbelief in abolishing written Chinese characters for an alternative spelling system. Tu Weiming also observes that "The most radical iconoclastic assertion espoused by some of the articulate May fourth intellectuals - that Chinese culture, not just Confucianism, but the idiographic language itself, would have to be abolished as a precondition for China's modernisation - is now regarded as completely outdated. Even the most ardent Westernizers in Beijing and Shanghai chose to see their ideas circulated in the Chinese journals printed in Chinese characters" (Tu 1994:8). I asked my informant, who worked for a provincial newspaper, what he thought of the idea of abolishing Chinese characters and replacing them with a system of spelling writing. He immediately opposed the idea and said,

> "After the death of Mao, before Deng took power, that is in the Hua Guofeng era, once again, some people advocated abolishing Chinese characters. They wanted to use *hanyu pinyin* (or called *pinyin*, the system of phonetic spelling in English alphabets used to aid the pronunciation of the standard national vernacular, *putonghua*) to replace Chinese characters, that is, to complete an unfinished job. This is not at all acceptable (*bukequ*)."

I then asked him why. He said,

> "To replace Chinese characters is even more backward (*luohou*) than replacing them with Western spelling. Because *hanyu pinyin* cannot differentiate different tones, it will cause confusion. Besides, if you add tone symbols on *hanyu pinyin*, it would be even more troublesome (*mafan*), because that way you cannot see clearly (for reading) what the words are. Another problem is the dialect. People who speak different dialects often pronounce *putonghua* differently. That is to say, the pronunciation of your dialect will affect your pronunciation of *putonghua*. That will cause confusion as well. If you use Chinese characters, then there wouldn't be such problems. Take this for example, in the entrance examination to universities (*gaokao*), you are tested on your ability to use *pinyin* spelling. For example, you are often shown four phrases from Tang poems in Chinese characters and four matching *pinyin* choices. Then you are supposed to pick the one *pinyin* choice that correctly translates/spells the written phrase. Many of my friends came out of the exam room saying "All the four choices look correct to me." They could hardly tell the difference in slightly different way of spelling in *pinyin*. The reason for that is that Kunming people speak poor *putonghua*, so all the answers look correct to them. Often the way you pronounce a character in Kunming dialect (*Kunming hua*) interferes with how you pronounce it in *putonghua*. Not just in Kunming, it is the same in many places. Many people are not familiar with *hanyu pinyin*. As a result, they cannot pass the *hanyu pinyin* test in the university entrance exam. Take my work unit for example. There are about thirty-odd people in my work unit, more than half of them are university graduates. But only about two out of these thirty-something people are fluent in *hanyu pinyin*, including me. Some people know how to pronounce a character in *putonghua*, but don't know how to write it in *pinyin*. In order to look a word up in the dictionary, you'll have to know how to write it in *hanyu pinyin* first. But my colleagues often don't know how to do this, so they cannot look words up in the dictionary either. They often come to me for help."

Surprised by his remark that *hanyu pinyin* was more backward than adopting an outright Western spelling, I asked him whether he considered other tried but failed spelling systems better. He rejected them straight away on the grounds that the meanings carried by the six principles (*liushu*) and pictograph in Chinese characters would be lost if those spelling systems were to replace written characters. In fact, he personally thought that the introduction of simplified characters was not something he would choose, because he thought "the unsimplified characters reflected best the principles of making characters. Their structures are also more visually attractive (*haokan*)." However, he also said that he did not really have a choice. Although unsimplified characters have been made unofficial, they are still used in *shufa*.[11] And, as pointed out by Jing Jun, they are also "consistently used for

[11] Deluxe editions of Mao Zedong's poetry are always written in unsimplified characters (Ramsey 19987:150)

religious objects, including ancestral tablets in household shrines, divination stalks, genealogical booklets, room-sized charts of ancestral names, poetic couplets for weddings and the lunar New Year, prayers for the birth of sons or the recovery of health, talismans attached to the highest beam of a house and paper money and coffin decorations for death rituals" (Jing 1996:110).

When people in Kunming talked about the difference between simplified characters used in the PRC and the traditional complex ones used in Taiwan and Hong Kong, they tended to emphasize that simplified characters were derived from *caoshu*, the cursive-script calligraphy. Interestingly, very few people ever told me it also extensively utilizes phonetic codes.[12] Although if you pointed it out to them, they would think a while and agree that the use of phonetic codes was also a common way for simplifying characters. But my informant, who worked for a jewellery factory, did point out the fact to me and said that he had read about it in a book. Apart from his case, the original intent of the script reform to raise literacy rates and render writing more accessible and less intimidating to the socially deprived population was rarely raised in conversation. And, the subject of incorporating "vulgar characters" was never mentioned. On one occasion, the conversation between two Kunming girls in their mid-twenties Lan and Yun, both university graduates, and me went as follows ('I' stands for myself):

Lan: (To me) Your unsimplified characters are so difficult to read. Are they not difficult to write?

I: I wouldn't know. I've been writing these characters since I was little. They are all I can write. It seems perfectly natural to me. Frankly, the problem of simple or difficult does not exist in my mind when it comes to writing these characters. When I write, these characters simply flow one after another. It does not seem difficult to me at all. For me, simplified characters are far more difficult to write but only because I have never learned to write them.

Lan: But they seem so difficult to me. Some of the characters you write have so many strokes. I wouldn't remember where to put what. It's too complicated.

Yun: [Disapprovingly and defensively.] Simplified characters we use are originally derived from *caoshu*.

Lan: Is that right? I thought they were created by just cutting off some strokes from complex characters randomly.

Yun: It is not like that at all. If you look at some works of *caoshu*, you'll realize how similar they are. *Caoshu* is beautiful to look at, so wild and

[12] This tendency is also found in almost all the students or scholars from the PRC I have met in London.

unrestrained. Mao Zedong wrote incredible *kuangcao* (wild cursive script). That's where he got the inspiration for character simplification from.

On another occasion, the conversation between me and a young man, a graduate from a college for professional training in Kunming, went as follows:

He: Do you have any problem reading simplified characters?
I: Not as far as I notice. There are some little problems, such as the speed of reading and sometimes I am not absolutely sure what some characters mean. Most of the time, I can guess correctly from the characters before and after the one I don't know (i.e., the context). But I seem to get better and better all the time.
He: I practise calligraphy, not very diligently though. So I sometimes have to learn how to write unsimplified characters. I find them hard to remember and rather cumbersome. Do you know that simplified characters are derived from *caoshu* originally?
I: I've heard many people say that before.
He: They are.
I: What does that mean to be derived from *caoshu*? What aspects are you thinking of?
He: The form of characters (*zixing*). *Caoshu* is not easy to write. There are many connected strokes so it flows more elegantly.
I: What about other aspects of *caoshu*, such as the *shi* (graphic dynamics, see chapter 4)? To me, simplified characters don't seem to capture the *shi* of *caoshu* though. They seem to me to be arrested and lacking the dynamics of *caoshu*. What do you think?
He: You may be right. But I think it is easier to write *caoshu* when you know how to write simplified characters.

Before plunging headlong into providing an interpretation, it is necessary to make a brief excursion into the subject of *caoshu*. What is the status of *caoshu* in popular conception?[13] *Caoshu* is popularly thought of as a higher achievement in calligraphy. The swiftness and deftness of execution this style of calligraphy demands can only be achieved after one has acquired a certain degree of technical fluency. It is also thought of as a free-flowing style, therefore a greater degree of spontaneity is required. It is, as summed up by a popular verdict, "a style that celebrates individuality and obscurity and is self-consciously contrary to the demands of maintaining orderly bureaucratic communication and records [in the regular style] in a far-flung agrarian empire" (Kraus 1991:43). In other words, while the

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[13] It is necessary to make the distinction between the public idea and that of experts. The latter often hold very different views on this subject. Some critiques think that the seemingly more rigid and manageable regular style is harder to write well, therefore artistically superior, because it is harder to disguise the imperfection of brush techniques.

political elite could indulge themselves in the flamboyant and self-expressing art of *caoshu*, their underlings were often discouraged from it. Those who already possess power are able to flaunt it, leaving other people to guess what they actually write since *caoshu* is often unintelligible to the uninitiated eye (ibid.:43-44). For instance, Mao's highly acclaimed calligraphy is hardly legible to the majority of literate Chinese. In other words, one can say that it is a more artistic and more elitist style than the regular style, for which legibility and precision are more important. Against this background, a plausible interpretation on the emphatic association with *caoshu* is no longer far from reach. Apart from Lan, who is inclined to emphasize her awkwardness and ignorance very readily, in the two examples, they seem to be more concerned with the potential aesthetic quality of simplified characters than other aspects. Within this circle of young Chinese, there is a tendency to shrug off the Leftist association of simplified characters. Instead, they would rather associate it with *caoshu*, the most elitist of elitist art in China, so that its superiority can be established. In their attempt to defend simplified characters, the historical *raison d'être* of simplified characters is forgotten - it is a system of writing that incorporates popular "vulgar characters" (convenient writing, so to speak) and eagerly approaches the spoken language so as to be more accessible to the illiterate population in China. In this respect, it seems that the traditional literati values have begun to resurface in a field that has always been revered as the essence of Chinese culture - written characters.

6.2.6 Implication of the Script Reform to the Literacy Thesis

The basic assumption of the ideogram myth is the intimate relationship between the graphic form of writing and its meaning. What character simplification does is to sever this tie. By changing the graphic components of characters, meaning preserved in the form is lost. This is particularly so when the only guide to replacement is pronunciation, but perhaps not so much for cases in which the change is guided by a shorthand style of calligraphy. In other words, the alleged tie between form and meaning is sustained when form evolves, e.g., towards a more abstract or cursive style of execution. But when pronunciation interferes, the tie is irrevocably severed. This is the assumption of ideograms. It is also the underlying logic of Bloch's statement that "a reduction of the number of ideograms or simplification of them will be a reduction in knowledge". Since the interference of pronunciation, is a more commonly employed technique in creating new simplified characters, character simplification reform should have caused a significant drain in knowledge, if Bloch's statement is right.

But the truth is that the rebus technique has always been the most effective method for creating Chinese characters. It is by no means a modern invention. On the contrary, it has played an extremely important role in generating knowledge through writing for thousands of years. The modern reform of character simplification is no more than a systematic measure to stretch the rebus technique further in order to render the system of writing more accessible to the masses. If such a procedure diminished meaning loaded in written characters, it has been going on constantly for thousands of years, long before the modern script reform was implemented. In that case, it is not clear what the unaltered or un-reduced version of knowledge is in the first place, not to mention the deduction from the ideogram myth, that is, a reduction of the number of ideograms or simplification of them will mean a reduction in knowledge.

Flawed it may be, the deduction from the myth, i.e., the relationship between writing and knowledge, may be what is actually circulated among the users of written characters, as Bloch claims to be happening to the Japanese.

6.3 Linguistic Myth Turned into Social Reality

The importance of the ideogram myth does not lie in its beguiling power over Euro-American intellectuals in search for an exotic system of writing, but over the Chinese themselves. It is the Chinese who have succumbed to the bewitching charm of the ideogram myth. From here we can trace back to <u>one</u> origin, among others, of the social power of written characters. The myth I have depicted stretches further to the social domain and is passionately embraced by the Chinese literati. The remarks made by my informants are but some of the typical examples of the pervasive belief. To fully appreciate the social effect of the linguistic myth, we have to ask, what would be the social consequence if people really believed that characters were the base of knowledge? In that case, I suggest, written characters would stop being merely a medium of communication. They would acquire ontological significance as roughly described by Bloch.

But what does it mean for characters to have 'ontological significance'? By 'ontological significance', I mean that characters are no longer seen as a creation of man.

Instead, they are treated as if they have lives of their own. Their meanings and influence are no longer confined to what they were created for, but assume certain autonomy. They are seen to be in direct contact with some higher order to which humans normally have no access. It also means that they would be treated very seriously indeed. They would stop being just a medium of communication as is proclaimed by Goody. Instead, they are treated as possessing much more profound information. In other words, they would actually be seen as a repository of knowledge in themselves. As Smith put it, "Written characters have a special "spirit" - a life and power of their own... They were, in a very real sense, the things they represented, and like trigrams and hexagrams, they could not only reveal the future but actually cause things to happen... In Qing popular culture, charms often took the form of written "orders" from superior deities to lesser ones, and many Chinese believed that a piece of paper with the character "to kill (*sha*)" on it, or one that bore the word for a disease, a destructive animal, or an evil spirit, could actually harm other people" (Smith 1991:202). Characters are also seen to give insight into otherwise undetectable situations in the cosmological world. For instance, "Only after having erected the columns and hoisted the ridge-pole may the surrounding wall be built. It is not permitted to tamp a wall first and then build the house. In this way, the character *kun* 困 , 'trouble', is formed, which brings ill luck"[14] (Bray 1997:163-164).

The efficacy of written characters can also be seen in the written form of name. Written names are believed to contain secret information about the course of personal life. A person whose *ming* (fate) lacks some of the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth) is given a name the written form of which contains the lacking elements in order to balance out the in his/her *ming* (Smith 1991:202; Watson 1986:622; Jones 1997:22-24). I was told several times that my name suggested that I would gain significant weight from the age of twenty-three onwards. The reason, according to them, was to be found in a new set of characters that can be reconstituted from the shuffled parts of the written form of my name (Fig. 6.4). Luckily, it did not turn out to be true. This example stands astride between the written effect of names and glyphomancy. Phenomena like glyphomancy (*cezi*) and careful choice over written forms of names (Watson 1986) are also concrete social effects of the ontological significance of characters. We shall look at some of these examples next.

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[14] From *Jiabao quanji* (Complete collection of household treasures), compiled by Shi Chengjin Yangzhou and first published in 1707.

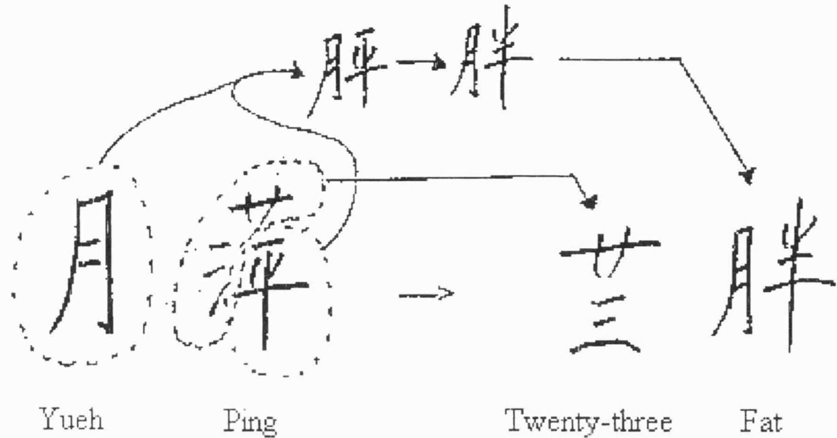

Fig. 6.4 Destined to put on significant weight!?

6.3.1 Telltale Written Forms: Solving Character Puzzles

Cezi, sometimes called *chaizi* (lit. to disassemble written characters), is a popular form of divination. It is a wonderful example of the Chinese obsession with written characters. The chosen character (by the client) is first broken up into a few component parts, each of which has meanings of its own. Then the constituent parts are re-combined in ways that the fortune-teller is able to interpret in accord with the question posed by the client. The questions range from marriage (*hunyin*), business/career prospects (*shiye*), financial prospects (*qiancai*) or examination results on the general side, to highly specific ones such as the whereabouts of a stolen object or other unrevealed aspects of events. Principles that govern the operation of *cezi* are, on the whole, consistent with the six principles of the formation of Chinese characters, and sometimes in combination with a wide range of cosmological correlations as well as literary allusions (Jing 1994; Smith 1991:201-204). However, an enormous amount of imagination is required to adapt any randomly chosen characters to the highly specific personal situations in question. For different priming questions, different ways of breaking up characters are essential for interpretations that make sense. Some fortune-tellers reduce the mental pressure on themselves by limiting the number of characters a client can choose (Smith 203-4).

In a scene of a *cezi xiansheng* (*cezi* fortune teller) more than a hundred years ago, the diviner was depicted by Williams as having a sapient look, and his client received his divination with tremendous respect (cited in Ahern 1981:51). Nowadays, in Kunming, the image of *cezi xiansheng* has become a lot more mundane, or even vulnerable. The type of *cezi xiansheng* that most Kunming people are familiar with certainly does not look, or even intends to appear, erudite. In 1995, they were mostly migrant workers, sitting on a low wooden stool on the pavement with a piece of carelessly torn cardboard lying on the dust-carpeted ground indicating their specialty - *cezi*. Two years later, I returned to Kunming and found a lot more squatter fortune tellers flanking the dusty pavements. Traffic and building construction was as buoyant as before. For migrant workers who come to the city to try their luck, trading imagination through glyphomancy offers yet another channel towards potential prosperity. I was continuously warned by my host families not to go near them, because they said, "They are *pianzi* (swindlers). Don't trust them. Nowadays in China, only swindlers are real."[15] However, I had an opportunity to consult a 'real fortune teller' (*zhende suanming xianshen*, real in the sense that he was not a migrant worker trying his luck and, allegedly had been practising for a long time) in Dali, a small town, about 400 kilometres from Kunming.

As soon as I approached him, he asked me what I would like to know about my life (*suan sheme*). So I chose a category that I felt least personal to myself at that time, that is, financial prospects (*qiancai* or *caiyun*). He asked me to pick a written character that came to my mind at that very moment. No character came to my mind for a few seconds. He rushed me out of silence and said "Don't think (*buyao xiang*)!" I panicked. Then I saw a tree in the street, so I said "*shu* (tree)". I wondered how my financial future was, as it were, written in the 'tree'. He began by asking which year I was born. After a few seconds' contemplation, he told me how my financial future was written in the 'tree' (Fig. 6.5). He said,

> "Your zodiac sign is rooster (*shu ji*). You are twenty-nine years old. Your *ming* (fate)[16] is of the category of *tu* (earth). This *shu* (tree) character is very

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[15] For a full treatment on the relationship between city dwellers and migrant workers, see chapter 2.

[16] The notion of *ming* is generally translated as 'fate'. However, a quick look at the origin of the character *ming* may provide a better picture of its meaning. [Another cogent example of the habit to acquire extra-insight into things through the written forms of characters, see chapter 2.] According to Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi*, *ming* originally means decree. The ancient graph of the character *ming* is composed of

good. There is a *ji* (auspicious) character in it. And, there is a *dou* (beans) character at the bottom. Beans are grains, important foodstuff. You have no worry for getting fed properly. Both characters mean that you have no worry for money. And if you put the two sides close together, it forms a *cun* (village) character. *Cun* is a homophone (*xieyin*), of *chun*, which means spring. That is to say, after the first month of the lunar calendar (*zhengyue*), your luck with money will become very good. February, March and April are spring time. Spring is auspicious. May, June and July are summer. Summer is of the category of fire (*huo* of the five elements). Fire gives rise to earth (*tu*, the category of my fate in terms of five elements). It also indicates that your money luck (*caiyun*) will be good in the summer. Let me see your palm. [He studied my palm.] The money line is this one. The grain of the line is clear, it also indicates that your money luck is good."

After being assured of my financial future, I left the fortune teller happily.

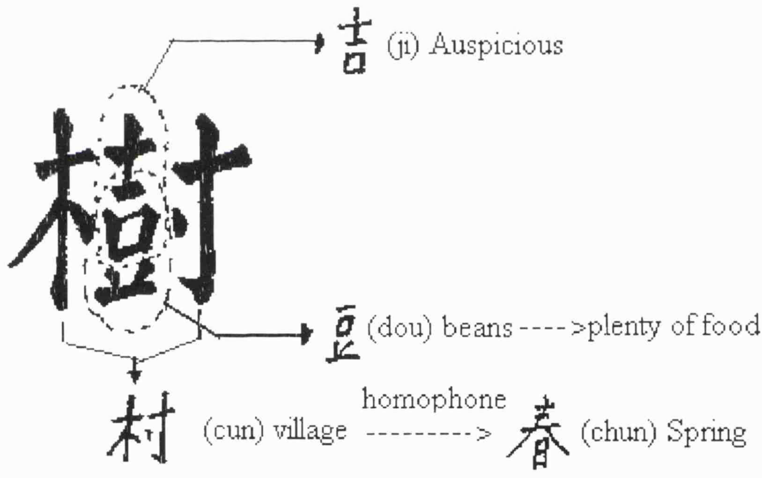

Fig. 6.5 My financial future as written in the 'tree'.

It is interesting to see how the fortune teller rearranged the written form of the character I chose by sheer accident, and offered an interpretation of the shuffled parts of the character in relation to the question I posed. He segmented the character *shu* into four parts with an overlapping *kou* (mouth) character. Then he moved them around to form another

a mouth, a tent and a person kneeling (cf. Rohan/Needham 1978:294). In use, it refers to heavenly commands to man. Coupling with the notion of *ming* in contemporary use, it can be understood that one's *ming* (fate) is like a decree of heavenly command that cannot be violated.

character *cun* (village), from which a new character *chun* (spring) was derived by the principle of homophone. From that point, he freely drew reference to the idea of five elements (*wuxing*) and the relationship among the five elements to provide me with more information on when my money luck would improve. Finally he tried to confirm his interpretation by drawing in external evidence from palm-reading.

6.3.2 Genesis in the Form of Written Characters

In fact the power of written characters for the Chinese is so irresistible that even Christian missionaries in China have to develop a version of Genesis interpreted on the basis of the written forms of Chinese characters. In January 1996, I was given a section of a pamphlet published by a Christian association in Taiwan and widely circulated within the Christian community. Similar pamphlets are mentioned by Kraus (1991:21, 176) as having been circulated in Fuzhou on the eastern coast of China.[17] To my amusement, the material is an attempt to 'prove' that the truth of Christianity is contained within the written forms of Chinese characters. So, it claims that even wise Chinese ancestors recognized the truth of Genesis, as recorded in written characters, so of course it HAS TO BE TRUE! Moreover, it also intends to prove that Christianity is not a foreign religion or a weapon of Western imperialism, because one can see the wonderful enlightenment of God, even in Chinese characters. Here are two examples offered in the pamphlet.

In Fig. 6.6, the authors argue that the reason why the character meaning "to create" is based on the root "mouth", instead of hand, can only be explained by Genesis. God basically created the world with his mouth by saying 'Let there be light... Let there be water...' In another example (Fig. 6.7), the authors argue that, according to archaeological evidence, the most ancient sampan or boat in China was made from a hollowed tree trunk, therefore could take no more than one person. As a result, the number "eight", which appears in the character *chuan* (boat, ark, sampan), is rarely connected with passenger numbers in a boat in Chinese historical archives. The only explanation for the origin of this character is that Noah's ark saved Noah's family of eight. The section of the pamphlet I was given includes no less than ten examples as far-fetched and etymologically false as the two

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[17] Kraus (1991:176) claims that he found the book that is likely to be the origin of this material: C. H. Kang & Ethel R. Nelson, *The Discovery of Genesis: How the Truth of Genesis were Found Hidden in the Chinese Language* (St. Louis: Concodia Publishing House, 1979).

depicted here. The implication is obvious. In order to convert Chinese people to Christianity, they resort to a means of justification totally familiar to the Chinese themselves, that is to dig into the etymological roots of written characters. Even though the 'research' is done by Westerners, according to the pamphlet, the 'researchers' apparently employed a set of rules which mirror those used to solve character puzzles by the Chinese.

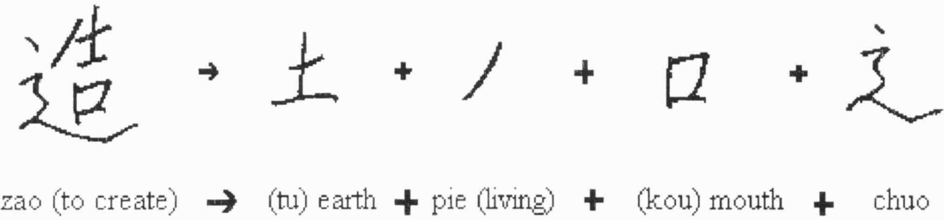

Fig. 6.6 The world was created by mouth!

船 → 舟 + 八 + 口

chuan (boat, ark) → zhou (sampan) + ba (eight) + kou (mouth)

Chuan (boat, ark). The character can be split into three parts: zhou (sampan), ba (eight) and kou (mouth), commonly used to denote the number of people.

Fig. 6.7 The character *chuan* records the fact that Noah's Ark saved Noah's family of eight.

From examples such as these, it seems highly plausible that the efficacy and revelation attributed to written characters can be explained as a corollary of the ideogram conviction. The examples provided here indicate that characters are conceived to contain profound or hidden knowledge that reaches beyond its superficial meaning as a word. They are indeed regarded as a repository of knowledge that transcends the immediacy of language and that lies beyond the grasp of the writer himself. Speech, as another means of communication, is an inferior "low form" - a poor refraction of the base of knowledge

(Bloch 1989:30) - precisely because of its lack of this ontological significance. This is the social effect of a linguistic myth. Once the myth escapes the linguistic boundary, it is enshrined, revered and finally turned into reality in the social sphere. This is exactly what has happened to the Chinese. And it leads us to the gate of the enchanted world of writing.

7. The Enchantment, Disenchantment and Re-enchantment of Calligraphy

7.1 The Enchantment of Calligraphy

The world of writing inhabited by the Chinese is a world of enchantment,[1] in which magico-religious beliefs abound. The power of writing was so great that its coming into existence, as described in the myth quoted on the cover page, caused the sky to rain with millet and ghosts to wail in the night. Instead of semiotic signs that denote "the world out there",[2] writing, in China, is seen as having an ontological existence. Written words, "altogether constitute or produce the reality which they express or represent... The written word is not merely a symbol but is in some sense identical with the thing it denotes" (Chaves 1977:209). In the beginning, written characters were considered "nascent realities" - things still close to the origin and the primal manifestations of beings, rather than arbitrary conventions (Billeter 1990:246-53). As a result, the primary goal of calligraphy was always to 'give life' to written characters in order to restore them to what they were meant to be. Writing does things. It acts and is acted upon. The 'animism' of writing mingles with human and spiritual agencies, which together constitute a world of magic. In short, writing, to the Chinese, is endowed with magical power.

The magical association of writing has been noted in numerous scholarly studies (Kraus 1991:4-5; Chaves 1977; Smith 1991, etc.). The mysterious power of writing is best

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[1] Enchantment is meant here in the Weberian sense that some aspect of the world operates as it does because of magical forces (Giddens 1971:170-8).

[2] Zito notes that the Western "idea of signs that function as a denotative system, existing between an isolated all-knowing subject and his word, a medium to be manipulated at will to describe a world 'out there', would have been foreign to the ritualist sensibility" found in the Record of Rites and shared by thinkers such as Zheng Xuan of the Han and Kong Yingda of the Tang (Zito 1997:102). Similar attitudes can be found in Western art: "A picture is not a copy of a copied being but is in ontological communication with what is copied" (Freedberg 1989:77).

attested by the Daoist practice of talisman (*fulu*).[3] These are composed of a complex of recognizable written characters together with some jointed waves, lines and circles without linguistic meanings. *Fulu*, magical writing, is believed to be invested with various supernatural powers, such as healing, deterring evil spirits from entering houses (*zhenzhai*, meaning to suppress the intrusive elements and guard the house), guarding the body-person (*hushen*, lit. to protect the body-person), attracting wealth (*jucai*, lit. to assemble money or wealth) or fulfilling personal wishes.[4] The simple presence of magical writing is believed to be enough to invoke or expel evil spirits. The house, or the body/person physically attached to the magical writing, is guarded from the harassment of unwelcome elements.

The healing and empowering potency of writing is further extended to the ink with which characters are written. A poem by Mei Yaochen (1002-1060), a famous Song poet, describes how so many people scraped bits of ink off a Buddhist temple's walls decorated with calligraphy that the calligraphy looked "as if birds had pecked at it" (Chaves 1977:210-211). Similar examples can also be found in contemporary China.[5] Lu Xun's father was prescribed, by a traditional physician, a dose of old ink to cure him of blood vomiting, which he gulped down after some hesitation (Kraus 1991:5). In a documentary broadcast in 1989, "[When] Shao Shiping, a governor of Jiangxi province, the brightest lad of his village, was about to be sent off to school in the city, his proud but superstitious neighbours held a ceremony in the village temple. They fed the young man a soup into which they mixed freshly ground ink, thereby *empowering his body with the scholar's fluid*" (ibid.:4-5; italic

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[3] For more information on *fulu* in popular religion, see Ahern 1981; Feuchtwang 1992; Schipper 1993a; Legeza 1975; Jing 1994:220-228; Zheng 1994:294-307. It is worth mentioning that a lot of potent *fulu* are produced by illiterate and calligraphically untrained mediums. They claim that the only reason why they are suddenly able to write is a demonstration of the power of deities behind the scenes. Without the supernatural forces, they would be unable to produce Chinese characters, be they standard, distorted or concocted with other graphic elements. Hence, participating mediums do not simply copy out pre-memorized graphic recipes of *fulu*. Instead, they are acting like marionettes, controlled by the strings of supernatural forces in the middle of practice. Human agents are simply 'borrowed' to perform the practice. However, the practice of producing *fulu* is varied both geographically and diachronically. Therefore, this version of practice cannot be taken to be universal in China. It has been recorded that adept calligraphers also practised *fulu* writing (Chaves 1977:208-9). Interestingly, "in the Six Dynasties, there was a close association of the early Chinese master calligraphers with the Tianshi Dao sect, emphasizing calligraphic excellence" (ibid.:211). Included among these master calligraphers was the Saint of Calligraphy, Wang Xizhi, along with other famous members of his family.

[4] *Fulu* are normally pasted on the wall or other parts of the building, placed in garments or carried around in little red fabric sachets, or burned to produce ashes. The ashes can be mixed with water then swallowed, wiped over the body of the inflicted person, or used to wash his/her face with.

[5] Many things associated with writing seem to have acquired such extrapolated potency. Apart from ink, writing brush hair has also been prescribed to cure sexual impotence (Sivin, cited in Kraus 1991:5).

my own emphasis). Ink, as the fluid of writing, is an emblem of what one consumes and incorporates in the process of *wen*-transformation. People who have studied abroad are said to have drunk foreign ink (*heguo yangmoshui*). The drinking of freshly ground ink is, therefore, a symbolic act of empowerment - the scholarly substance is consumed to strengthen the scholarly body-person, which also leads to bright prospects for social success.

The word 'enchantment' can be used in a Weberian sense, in which it implies the operation of magical forces. Or it can also be in the sense used in everyday speech, in which it does not necessarily involve magico-religious beliefs. In reality, what comes with the enchantment of calligraphy/writing in the former sense is its enchantment in the latter sense, i.e., people 'come under the spell' of calligraphy/writing. The word 'entrancement' is used interchangeably with the non-Weberian sense of enchantment in the remaining of the dissertation. Therefore, when the word is used, it is to highlight that no magico-religious convictions are implied in the context of discussion. In this dissertation, I have described several instances of enchantment in an everyday speech sense: First, public calligraphy is embroiled into the functioning of the social fabric of the PRC. Second, writing is an extension of the body-person. Third, the bodily techniques of writing are integral to the acquisition of Chinese identity. And finally, belief in the linguistic ideogram myth is turned into social reality and plays an active role in everyday life of the Chinese.

Calligraphy, the most entrancing form of writing in the eyes of the Chinese, also teems with the characteristics of magico-religious beliefs. Admittedly, it is a tricky task to separate the two types of enchantment, because one often leads to another. To the best of my knowledge, to date no such distinction has been made in any scholarly writing on Chinese writing/calligraphy. The 'power' of calligraphy/writing has always been treated as all-encompassing. The umbrella term 'power' is conventionally employed to simultaneously include magico-religious, artistic, as well as political influences. For the sake of analysis, one should benefit from this conceptual clarification. The main concern of this dissertation, however, is the non-Weberian enchantment. As an anthropological study of calligraphy, it is obliging to offer an emic description of its enchantment, as well as an etic interpretation of the disenchantment. In the Weberian sense, the disenchantment of the world is carried out by "the elimination of magical thought and practice" and its "rationalization" (Giddens 1971:183). Similarly, breaking the non-magico-religious spell of calligraphy, or the

demystification of calligraphy, can also be achieved by its "rationalization". This can be achieved from both inside and outside the immediate world of calligraphy. The internal approach is done by, first, replacing the mysterious-sounding old terms of calligraphy with neutral technical terms that explain the working logic of calligraphy, and then revealing the enchanting technology of calligraphic production. The external approach aims to provide a social interpretation for the enchantment (as Bourdieu has done to taste and art).

My first attempt at the rationalization of calligraphy concerns the disputable terms used to describe the apotheosis of calligraphic achievement.

7.2 The Disenchantment

7.2.1 Rationalising Antidote 1: The Apotheosis of Calligraphy

While a novice in calligraphy trudges along the path towards technical fluency, s/he at the same time ascends the steps towards a glorified state of ideal calligraphy, i.e., the final ultimate achievement of the calligraphic execution as conceived by calligraphy practitioners. As mentioned earlier, to achieve technical fluency, one is supposed to go through stages such as internalising the images of model characters, building up a reservoir of knowledge concerning how brush movements correspond to calligraphic forms, then transcribing the retrieved mental images into a sequence of motorial movements. It is exactly on the unimpeded flow of this process of execution that the calligraphic peak experience is pivoted.

The pinnacle of calligraphic achievement teems with images of absolute smoothness, with effortlessness and unimpeded flow and extreme harmony of component action.[6] The calligrapher concentrates his thoughts and imaginary characters form in his mind, he picks up the brush and wields it in a crisp and swift manner on paper. During this process, artistic conceptions (*yi*) flow from the clear mind of the calligrapher, down to the arms, out through

[6] The ultimate achievement of calligraphy is frequently elaborated in texts on the appreciation of calligraphy. However, there is no single authoritative version of the ideal state. Each description is set out as an attempt at expressing an intensely intimate personal experience. As a consequence, what we have is a compilation of personal accounts on calligraphic 'peak experiences'. This ideal state of consummation is circulated and perpetuated among calligraphers, not through concrete words depicting exact happenings, but through visual imagery.

his fingers, then into the resilient brush, and are finally realised on paper. This flow is envisioned as highly concentrated, controlled, directed and moving without any blockage or stagnancy. Each component of action strives for upmost economy and freedom without being constrained by other elements. In the middle of this state of ultimate perfection - the state of *tianren heyi* (when nature/heaven and human merge into one) - the mosaic of interdependent component actions are coordinated in such flawless harmony that each of them obtains the optimum economy. However, this state of absolute spontaneousness, often called *ziran* in Chinese, was never understood as a facet of consciousness by Chinese calligraphy theorists,[7] or to be more exact, not until very recently.[8] Instead, it was regarded as an exhibition of a rather miraculous power (*shen*). The great early Tang calligraphy master, Yu Shinan (558-638) once wrote, "The art of writing pertains to the primal mysteries. Effort alone is worth nothing. Everything depends on the mind encountering the origin of spirit, which is the source of all creativity. Success occurs of itself; it cannot be willed into existence" (Yu Shinan, *Bisui Lun*, in Ji 1988:8-9).

It is not difficult to see why the depiction of the calligraphic apotheosis makes a good target in the rationalization of calligraphic discourse. All one has to do is to look at a few key terms frequently used to depict this ideal state: *shen* (supernatural, miraculous), *shentong* (magical power) and *tianji* (nature's/heaven's mystery). Take the following frequently quoted passage for example:

> "To write is to express one's mind and emotions. When the brush is able to express one's mind at will, it is called *shen*. If the calligraphy is static and unchangeable, it is not approaching the state of *shen*... When the techniques and compositional rules are perfected to the extreme, it is called *shenhua* (lit. to make it *shen*). This is a state totally devoid of stagnancy and obstinacy, a state of utter flexibility and smoothness... To reach the state of *shen* is to respond spontaneously to the call of nature's mystery (*tianji*) and to resonate with life-like rhythms." (Xiang Mu's *Shufa Yayan*. In Wu 1988:368)

To reach the ultimate state of *shen* or *shentong* entails all the necessary effort in overcoming technical difficulties that might cause the blockage of the flow. As stated in the

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[7] Neither was the source of 'creativity' in paintings seen to come from the artist-genius's in the West until the Renaissance. Unconsciousness (or a facet of consciousness), seen as the source of creativity in arts, did not become popular in the West until the Romantic era (Osborne 1968:131-154).

[8] In recent years, the study of calligraphy has been taken to the cognitive psychology laboratory (cf. Kao 1991; Kao & Guan 1995). As a result, the role of both motorial and cognitive memory in the writing process has been brought to attention to contemporary calligraphy theorists, such as Qiu Zhenzhong (1995).

concluding sentence of the quote, one has to respond spontaneously to the call of nature's mystery, *tianji* - some kind of divine intervention - to reach that perfect state of *shen*. In other words, the transition from technical mastery to the consummate state of *shen* cannot happen without this intervention from an inexplicable source. One can perhaps get a better grip of the whole picture by envisioning it as the energy diagram of an atom. An external energy source is needed to excite an electron moving on a fixed orbit and free it totally from the influence of the nucleus. *Tianji* is such an input of energy from external sources, a force that catapults a work of technical virtuosity to calligraphic consummation. However, the source of *tianji* is unspecified - like a mystical fog, so dense and impenetrable that it is utterly beyond the delineation of words. The fog is perpetuated by evading direct reference to its contents, as well as by denying any explicable access to it. "Techniques and rules can be taught through words; whereas *shenmiao* (same as *shen*) can only be grasped via unspeakable realisation" (Zhou Xianzong, *Ganyu Lu*, in Wu 1988:370). Just as a mountain peak is cloaked by cloud and mist, the artistic peak of calligraphy is also shrouded by an inexplicable spell. This analysis readily leads to the conclusion that the ideal state of calligraphy is a mystified state. Choosing to unravel this mystification can be seen as a shattering act to the calligraphic idol.

Similar mystification also exists in how the calligraphic pinnacle is attributed to firmly established masterpieces. I was drawn to such a suspicion by my calligrapher informant:

> "The actual achievement of a piece of work also depends on the interpretation. Take Wang Xizhi's "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion (*Lanting xu*)" for example. It has been regarded as work of perfection in the history of Chinese calligraphy, but Wang himself might not have thought so because you can see that he deleted and altered (*tugai*) the content at various places. In other words, the perfection of *Lanting jixu* is something like a myth in the mouths of later generations (*houren zuili chuan de shenhua*). If you still are not convinced, I can give you another example. Zheng Banqiao's eccentricity has been interpreted in two different ways.[9] In his own time, Zheng was regarded as eccentric because he left a promising official post (*qiguan buzuo*), which was thought to be an indication to his lofty (*qinggao*) character. But nowadays, his eccentricity is thought to lie entirely in his calligraphy/*zi*. He studied many different masters' calligraphic styles earlier in his life. Later he managed to create his own style. People say that his *zi* is

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[9] See chapter 5, footnote 31 for more information on Zheng Banqiao.

> like a patchwork, like jumbled stones paving the stairs (*luanshi pujie*). This is an example of *zi* being meshed with nature (*yu ziran xiang qianhe*) - a good example of so-called *tianren heyi*, having become one with the nature. But you have to understand that when he wrote his *zi*, his intention was to express according his heart/mind (*xin*). He didn't intend to be merged with nature (nature's mystery)."

His remark is revealing because it opens up another social dimension implicated by the calligraphic myth of nature/self merge as the ultimate achievement (cf. Wang 1994).[10] According to him, neither Wang Xizhi nor Zheng Banqiao ever intended to become merged with nature when they wrote their calligraphic works. Nevertheless, many of their works have long been celebrated as paragons of calligraphic perfection, examples of *zi* that are instantiations of such a merge - the embodiment of calligraphic myth. In other words, these calligraphers may not have achieved the state of *tianren heyi*, but *tianren heyi* was attributed to them "in the mouths of later generations" anyway. As a result, the status of these 'mythical works of calligraphy' is securely enshrined both in texts on calligraphy, as well as in the discourse of those that followed them. The most famous epitome of the 'mythical works' in history is Wang Xizhi's "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion", even though no original works by Wang Xizhi are extant. In other words, it does not matter whether these mythical works can be seen and judged, neither does it matter whether the calligraphers themselves regard themselves as having achieved the mythical state of perfection at the moment of writing. What matters is that these works have become, and continue to be, objects of worship in the minds of the generations that follow them. In this sense, these calligraphers, together with their calligraphy, are reified objects of reverence that are insulated from the ravages of time. The calligraphy itself, as an instantiation of the mythical state, may decay over time - in fact, most of them have done so in a physical sense - but never the halo that emanates from them. This halo preserves the calligraphic works, as well as their worldly creators, and protects them from the corrosion of time. In the cases of Wang Xizhi and Zheng Banqiao, what made their works candidates for permanent glory was almost certainly not their calligraphy *per se*, but other extra-aesthetic qualifications. However, what sustains the halo of their works is a belief exclusive to calligraphy - they are material embodiments of a calligraphic myth.

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[10] The state is sometimes called "spiritual communion (*shenhui*)" (Tu 1983:69).

7.2.2 Rationalising Antidote 2: A Formalistic Analysis

Demystification can also be carried out by replacing a set of heavily loaded and ambiguous calligraphic terms with neutral technical ones. In fact, this is one of the most common ways intellectually-minded art consumers in the West defend themselves against the emotive effect of artwork. They speak of a painting "in terms of colour, composition, expression, and the means of conveying things like space and movement" (Freedberg 1989:17).

The Chinese traditionally understand that the macrocosmic universe and the microcosmic human body interpenetrate one another in a shifting relationship, and *qi* (vital energy), the quasi-substance-cum-quasi-energy, interconnects the two systems. Another key term in calligraphic theory, *xingqi* (the running of *qi*), is therefore related to the 'flow' described in the calligraphic ideal state. Following this vein of thought, it is perfectly 'realistic' to describe the flow as the running and circulation of *qi*. Therefore the calligraphic work is seen as an embodiment of the cosmic *qi* mediated through the calligrapher's body (chapter 3).[11] In recent years, there has been a popular new theory that proposes replacing the traditional notion of *xingqi* with a more scientific study of normal axes of characters (*zhouxian*, which can be understood as the perpendicular axis of visual gravitation of calligraphic characters) (Qiu 1995:63-100). This analysis takes into account formal factors such as the degree to which the axes of individual character diverge from the perpendicular line, the interconnection between axes, and the coordination between sequences of individual character axes [*xingzhouxian*, i.e., the downward running of individual character axes because the direction of progression in Chinese calligraphy is a downward movement]. This form of analysis concentrates on the stability, vibration and interconnection of these character axis. It looks out for tilted axes and their gradients from the perpendicular line, as well as disjointed axes. The underlying logic is this: Works with a strong air of continuity and harmony are composed of connected or parallel axes, which evokes smooth-flowing sensation. On the other hand, a large proportion of disjointed or wildly tilted axes evokes a sense of abrupt pause, restless visual search and drift, which makes the work appear disintegrated or highly disturbed. These formal factors (replacing the traditional term *xingqi*) are interpreted as the major cause for the impression of smooth flow evoked by the work.

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[11] One can easily dismiss this interpretation by saying that *qi* is not provable scientifically. This contributes to the demystification of the calligraphic ideal.

In other words, the diagram of normal axes is believed to work like an oscillogram of expressive emotions in the process of writing.

The result of providing an interpretation based on the psychology of perception to calligraphy is this: The intangible esoteric components in the aesthetic conception of Chinese calligraphy, such as the running of *qi*, is dissolved into tangible formal ingredients, which can be clearly diagrammed, displayed, compared and analysed. In other words, it can be understood as an attempt to break the shackles of calligraphic mysticism by means of formal analysis. The sociological implication of this approach cannot be more apparent: If the work entrances, it is through the working of the psychology of perception and not through some inherent quality of the work *per se*, nor is it through some kind of 'existential extension' of the artist, i.e., *qi*.

7.2.3 Rationalising Antidote 3: The Enchantment of Technology

> *Technical virtuosity is intrinsic to the efficacy of works of art in their social context, and tends always towards the creation of asymmetries in the relations between people by placing them in an essentially asymmetrical relation to things.*
>
> (Gell 1992:52)

De-mystification can also be achieved by examining the production of asymmetric social relations by drawing attention to the techniques of calligraphic production. "Without skill there is no art" (Bateson 1973:247). The centrality of skill and technique in art is indisputable. It is therefore not surprising that "in anthropological definitions of art the manifestation of skill has frequently been regarded as the most prominent hallmark of those activities and objects referred to as art" (van Damme 1997). For example, Anderson defines visual art as "made by humans in any visual medium and whose production required a relatively high degree of skill on the part of their maker, skill being measured, when possible, according to the standards traditionally used in the makers' society" (Anderson 1979:11). Firth also notes that "a concept of art is hard to disentangle from notions of technical skill on the one hand and mystical knowledge and control on the other hand. Pleasure in deft arrangement of formal qualities is not absent. But it tends to find expression in technical judgement" (Firth 1992:24).

I mentioned earlier that, in museums, calligraphic works often elicit a sense of amazement in viewers (chapter 5), despite people's failure to understand their meaning. Though failing to comprehend the contents of the writing, they nevertheless appreciate the technical difficulty involved in the production by saying things such as "I cannot possibly write that", "How did he write this? Very astonishing (*tai lihai*)." Their sense of amazement was clearly related to the opacity regarding how the work was produced. Though unversed in the discourse of calligraphic appreciation, they nevertheless established an immediate relationship with a piece of work by acknowledging the incomprehensibility of the process of production, i.e., the techniques that have brought the work into existence.

This brings up another point raised by Gell in his article *The Technology of Enchantment* (1992) - artwork enchants because the technical process of its production is beyond the spectator. Or in some cases, the spell is cast on the distanced calligrapher who has already broken away from the immediacy of writing (when he admires his finished work afterwards). Some calligraphers in Chinese history, expressed their amazement at their own work produced when they were under the influence of alcohol.[12] For example, Wang Xizhi's Orchid Pavilion Preface was written under the influence of alcohol during a waterside party. After he sobered up, he re-wrote the preface numerous times but could never reproduce the same astonishing result (Hong & Shen 1984:19). The "Mad Drunkard" Zhang Xu (see chapter 4) is another famous example. He was said to often get very drunk, crying out and carrying on like a madman before writing. He often looked at his own writing after sobering up and was amazed at how miraculous (*shen*) it was (ibid.:37). Technical difficulty inspires awe, which is a major component of artwork's effect on the beholder. To the spectator, the awe-inspiring techniques displayed by the calligrapher invokes a parallel fascination in the calligrapher as a person. The calligrapher, as an occult technician who possesses marvellous skills in handling the brush, must be very special in some way to be capable of producing of such work. This is undoubtedly strengthened by the conviction that calligraphy is the extension of the calligrapher's body-person. At this point, the halo-transfer is in play. The moment when halo transfer occurs is also when social asymmetry is created. At this moment, the production of social relations through calligraphy is realised.

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[12] The influence of alcohol can be explained in various ways. For example alcohol can be understood as facilitating a less impeded release of acquired skill (Bateson 1973). Or it can aid the yielding of the self and artistic intention and entered a "selfless" state (*wuwo*). For a discussion on the significance of "selflessness" in Chinese art, see Li Zehou (1981, reprinted 1994).

Silenced Virtuosity and the Generation of Power

To most people, the entrancement of calligraphy, to those falling under its spell, is firmly grounded in technical virtuosity. However, as in many other Western art forms such as instrumental music, sheer virtuosity is denigrated as craftsmanship (Becker 1982:272-299). Similarly, the picture of the ideal state of calligraphic perfection is one in which both artistic intention (*yi*) and technical awareness are abolished. In this sense, the calligraphic apotheosis is fundamentally anti-technique. Once the mission of casting the spell is accomplished, technical virtuosity is played down to the point of oblivion. In fact, dismissing technique is considered a prerequisite to genuinely reaching the artistic pinnacle. As long as one is still aware of technical deliberation, the path to true perfection is blocked. In other words, the absolute perfection of technique implies the ability to cast it into oblivion.

Moreover, by denying technical virtuosity, the tie between the calligrapher and the writing is also slackened. Once technical virtuosity has carried one near the pinnacle, the calligrapher's responsibility gives in to a force stronger than personal creativity. As described earlier, not until magic comes through and the calligrapher becomes intimately connected with the mystery of nature can he really achieve the state of perfection. At the pinnacle of calligraphic pursuit, the calligrapher's creative contribution to a work is outshone by an overpowering halo that illuminates the 'holy trinity' of calligrapher, the work and nature's mystery. In other words, the revered calligraphic work is often regarded as "transcending the technical schemes of their creators", to paraphrase Gell (1992). Paradoxically, the calligrapher's agency responsible for the creation of the work is denied only to exalt the calligrapher to a higher status, that is, somewhere between human technician and transcendental influence. This is when the aura of the calligraphy, as well as its social power, is transferred to its worldly creator - the calligrapher. In short, the production of calligraphy - which is often attributed to transcendental influences - is simultaneously the production of social power. Human agency in the production of writing is effaced and given a divine explanation, which in turn generates the potential on the calligrapher's part to exercise further agency on the beholder/admirer. This mechanism of halo-transfer leads to another sociological rationalization of calligraphy.

After being unleashed from the production phase into the sea of social relations, calligraphy beginsto speak an unadulterated language of power.

7.2.4 Rationalising Antidote 4: Brushes with Power

Even at the very beginning of its existence, Chinese writing was closely associated with power. Writing in ancient China, either seen as derived from emblematic symbols of kin groups (*zuhui*) or as a way of divination (*jiagu wen*), was "invested with political and religious power" (Chang 1983:87). Writing was the medium through which knowledge from ancestors was communicated to the living. Therefore, it was - and still is - the "path to authority" (ibid.:81-93). Writing, to the Chinese, not only reveals secret knowledge and possesses magical power, it is also, more importantly, the way socio-political power speaks. As indicated at the outset of this dissertation, there is an intimate tie between calligraphy and social authority. For people who command little calligraphic knowledge, calligraphy always appears to be produced or associated with those of higher social status or with more influence. In the PRC, it is a language that speaks power, as well as one spoken by the powerful. It leads to power (social advancement via calligraphy) and is also a token used to flaunt power (political showmanship). It also sends messages to the wider public about the upheavals of power behind the scenes (the posting-up and scraping-off of public inscriptions). Moreover, it helps legitimate the succession of power (e.g., Hua Guofeng to Mao Zedong). It also grants power for expression (patronage by inscriptions) and exemption (protection by the indication of *guanxi* through calligraphy). Calligraphy, in short, is a highly empowered cultural form in China. The umbilical cord between calligraphy and social power has undoubtedly helped to create and sustain its halo. In other words, the entrancement of calligraphy significantly accrues because it is a language of power that weaves the social fabric.

These are possible, though admittedly not exclusive, ways of rationalizing and disenchanting Chinese calligraphy. They together contribute to the overall understanding of Chinese calligraphy as a social practice. However, I want to stress that to offer alternative ways (from those that have been popularly adopted) of interpreting Chinese calligraphy, either from the artistic or social perspective, does not invalidate previously accepted versions of interpretation.

7.3 The Re-enchantment of Calligraphy

> *"When the sage points to the moon," says the Chinese proverb, "the fool looks at his fingertip." Well, we have all educated ourselves to be fools!... This is what a social scientist learns at school, mocking the unwashed who naïvely believe in the moon. We know that when actors speak about the Virgin Mary, divinities, saligram, UFOs, black wholes, viruses, genes, sexuality, etc., we should not look at the things thus designated - who should be so naïve nowadays? - but look instead at the finger, and from there, following along the arm through the nerve fibres, to the mind of the believer, and from there, down the spinal cord to the social structure, to the cultural systems, to the discursivities, or to the evolutionary bases that make possible such beliefs."*
>
> (Latour 1997:77)

7.3.1 From the Finger Tip to the Moon, and Stop at the Moon

Underlying analysis aimed at the demystification of indigenous discourse is the assumption that a myth (indigenous belief system) can be 'explained away' or neutralized by rational reasoning - the "shattering hammer" of social scientists, in Latour's word (Latour 1997). This is often done by either introducing a replacement discourse, e.g., magic replaced by science, or by revealing the mechanism of its production in a social context. Whereas the replacement discourse is generally consistent with the popular ideology in the analyst's society; the revealing of the social genesis of the belief system often transcribes the indigenous belief into configurations of social relations. They assume that the element that entraps the indigenous mind naturally vanishes into thin air after the act of analytical translation. Although it is true that both rationalizing and demystifying approaches introduce understanding of another dimension, they inevitably remain etic analysis devoid of dialogical conversation with the emic understanding. In fact, they almost always aim to shatter the emic understanding.

The rationalization of calligraphy aims to disenchant it. Has the "shattering hammer" I have wielded succeeded in doing so? It seems to me that the answer remains illusive. The goal of an anthropological study, to me, is to take the reader on a voyage through the indigenous world, offering a necessary and convincing analysis of it, yet leaving the reader dazed when he reaches the final part and leaves the text behind. An anthropological study

of unfamiliar rites or social practices should not allow the reader to exit the game without feeling somewhat transformed, instead of simply informed. It ought to make the reader carry pieces of the indigenous world with him after he bids farewell to the world that once captured the emotions and imagination of the anthropologist. Encapsulated within pages, a world view or a set of social practices tend to convey a false serenity. The task of an anthropological study is to evoke the sense of immediacy and the intensity of engagement that engulf the indigenous people and, once, held captive the anthropologist. As in an animation film, the opening page pulls the audience into a world that is not subordinated to other worlds. In *James and the Giant Peach*[13], the Giant Peach sails little James away from a harsh reality dominated by his two cruel aunts, into a world of adventure. Finally James and the giant insects, who accompanied him on his journey, land in New York. They are immediately confronted with a question: Was the amazing journey 'real' in the accepted sense of the word? At this moment, it is easy to denigrate the adventure in the Giant Peach as simply a fantasy. But no, as the story goes, James and the giant insects settle down happily in New York. The fantasy is left to carry on in the minds of the audience. Anthropologists' words are, in a sense, like the Giant Peach. They open up a world of adventure to the reader. But they sometimes end the journey with the Giant Peach and the giant insects dramatically diminished in size and reduced to their original fruit and insect states. At this moment, the spell is irrevocably broken. What I am trying to say is this: The indigenous world should be handled with great care and delicacy. The raw sense of wonder that often embraces the anthropologist should be conveyed and preserved in spite of all the social analysis that seek to render indigenous practices and beliefs 'rationalized'. We have reached the point when this journey through the 'world of Chinese calligraphy' comes to an end. I want to make an effort to preserve the sense of wonder that drew me into this world. I want to be re-enchanted.

As stated in the quote that heads this concluding section, when the sage points at the moon, the fool looks at his fingertip, instead of the moon. Until now, I have played the part of the fool.[14] I have attempted to situate Chinese calligraphy in a social context with the hope that the mystique that shrouds it can be explained away by doing so. I have argued that the fuzzy boundary between *xiezi* and *shufa* has provided a fecund territory for social

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[13] An animation film adapted from Roland Dahl's story.

[14] I do not deny the validity and value of the role though.

manoeuvring. As a result, writing by socially influential figures is often flaunted as "inked treasure". Moreover, their calligraphic presence in the form of public inscriptions serves as an indicative token of a social relationship that can be manoeuvred towards the advantage of the owner of these calligraphic inscriptions. I have also argued that the acquisition of the bodily techniques through calligraphic training is an essential part of Chinese embodiment. Furthermore, I also contend that the linguistic myth of ideogram is turned into a social reality in which Chinese written characters have acquired ontological significance. This ontological significance of written characters further shapes the way the Chinese interpret and interact with the world. All of this contributes to the understanding of Chinese calligraphy/writing as a powerful social phenomena. However, I have been unsettled by a gnawing sense of unease since I completed an earlier draft of this conclusion. My unease stems from the realisation that I have not explained away the power of calligraphy to myself. In a way, an intellectual project is like a Chinese ghost. If a query has not found a subjectively satisfactory solution, it comes back to haunt you like an angry and hungry ghost. In order to free myself from this intellectual ghost, I was compelled to search further for a better solution. And eventually, I turned my gaze back to the moon which was pointed at by the Chinese sage, i.e., the agency of calligraphy.

7.3.2 The Agency of Calligraphy

Power and agency are inseparable. The power of calligraphy/writing over the Chinese, consequently, has to be traced back to the agency of calligraphy/writing. The agency of calligraphy can be understood, satisfactorily, within the framework of the agency of artefacts. In a series of works on anthropology of art (Gell 1992; 1996; 1998), Gell expounded an arresting idea - the technology of human social interaction - "the panoply of material artefacts which people devise and use specifically to captivate, intimidate, soothe, coerce, attract and otherwise engage with each other in sociality" (Harrison 1998:1). What couples with this technology is a distributed personhood to a multitude of objects fashioned and employed by the person in social action (Gell 1998). Social agency, understood this way, is not confined within the human body. It is, rather, disseminated and distributed among all "the extensions by means of which it acts towards others and thereby expresses itself" (Harrison 1998:1). A corollary of this idea of social agency is an erosion of the distinction between the subject and the object. Art objects - as "index of the agency" (Gell 1998:253) of the person and "embodiments or residues of the intentionalities" of the maker

(Gell 1996:37) - assume agency and act upon the perceivers or inter-actors. Consequently, the object turns into the subject and assumes the role of a social actor in the network of social interactions.

Gell's theory of art and agency is tremendously illuminating in thinking about the enmeshment of objects and persons. An interesting side-effect of this theory is this: Once the special agency of objects is brought to the fore, the ideological foundation of iconoclasm no longer holds. Objects are no longer merely passive, inanimate and limited to a secondary role in the human world of sociality. They act on humans - terrify, inspire, solace, enthral, endear and elicit a wide range of emotions - and therefore should be seen as active in social interactions. The intentionalities of the maker are first encapsulated in the objects. Writing calligraphy is therefore, to borrow Feuchtwang's words, "one among many rites of inspiration by which to inject or rather to invite life or agency into an object... and to treat that life as having a direction which is an intention because it is a concentration and possession of force or of feelings which were once visibly present as human beings by which can be re-enacted in the here and now of new circumstances" (Feuchtwang 1999). However once the objects, produced or employed by the maker/user in social action, are freed into the social world, they take on an autonomy that may, and often, transcend the original intentionalities of the maker/user. The objects are then emancipated from the agency of the maker/user and execute an agency of their own. Seen from this perspective, there is no longer justifiable reason to condemn worshippers of "mere things", as iconoclasts have done. So-called "mere things" are indeed active social participators that exercise influence on humans as other humans do.[15]

In order to open the eyes of iconoclasts to their own tendency toward "factishism", an equivalent of the fetishism they condemn, Latour (1997) has argued that iconoclasts have

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[15] Some may argue that this particular way of seeing the world is the result of the 'whirlpool effect' of the postmodern trend of thought. It shares its characteristic of the flux between previously distinct categories, in this case, objects and humans. However, I am inclined to think that the postmodern whirlpool - the flux - is but a self-conscious and systematic articulation of a particular strand of thought that has long enjoyed significant popularity in certain premodern societies. The well known *yin-yang* dialectic and traditional Chinese cosmology based on the circulation of *qi* are a good example of the flux between categories. Moore (1996) also gave examples from Africa of the thought style that has been regarded as characteristic of the postmodern way of thinking. Consequently, by calling an idea a ripple of the postmodern whirlpool does not constitute a genuine criticism. In fact, it is equally possible to say the criticism, more than the idea it criticises, is but a symptom of the postmodern contagion because it inevitably wears glasses with a postmodern filter.

invented "beliefs" and transplanted them to the minds of those they condemn. He contends that the notion of "belief" does not exist in the mind of the worshippers. The worshippers are simply, as it were, caught in a mesh of social acts. They are merely reacting to something that exercises certain captivating power over them. The enchanting power of Chinese calligraphy or written characters, as I see it, is rather similar to the power of religious icons, in the sense that it is often based on a set of assumptions that find no empirical evidence. For example, I pointed out in chapter 6 that the idea of Chinese written characters as ideogram is fundamentally flawed, therefore cannot support other ideas and behaviour that rest upon it. Nevertheless, the Chinese continue to actively participate in the fortification of the idea, even though they are not really ignorant of its falsity. Some may see this as self-contradictory and, therefore, illogical behaviour. However, this type of iconoclastic understanding fails to grasp what actually happens to the people who revere and adore written characters or calligraphy. Written characters or calligraphy, in many occasions, are indeed social actors, actively eliciting reverence or admiration. They are things, objects, or graphs of influence. They are perfectly capable of, as a human does, filling one with love, awe and passion. The technology of enchantment mentioned earlier is but one of the ways in which an artwork exercises its agency as a means to influence the thoughts and actions of others.

Another interesting instance is that Hua Guofeng's inscription was said to have boosted industrial production in a literal sense (Kraus 1991:125). The new title of Zhejiang Daily in Hua's own hand was even greeted with traditional drum-and-firecrackers festivity (ibid.:127). These examples can be approached from the perspective I expounded earlier, i.e., the agency of objects. The calligraphic inscription carries with it the hope and enthusiasm of the party leader - his intention to push forward the revolutionary project; to stimulate the lethargic and to strengthen the feeble. With the intentions of the party leader embodied in graphs as sophisticated and culturally accomplished as calligraphy, his inscriptions involuntarily become the source of power. They were empowered by the party leader, then took on an agency of their own. As a source of power and influence in themselves, calligraphic inscriptions may have actively energised people's working will. There is nothing mysterious in this. If a party leader himself can legitimately lay claim to revolutionary glory, why not his calligraphic inscriptions? After all, the calligraphic inscriptions are no less charismatic and influential social actors in their own right.

However, not all indices of the party leader's agency are capable of such influence. Devoid of its magical appeal, calligraphic inscription might not have been a successful 'index' for eliciting compliance. It takes something as culturally empowered as calligraphy to carry the load of the party leader's agency.[16] Calligraphy borrows its halo from divine association and is later endowed with the power to create magical effects. The calligraphy of the party leader was like a spell cast on the productive force of the country. As Trobrianders' gardening magic depicted by Malinowski boosted the growth of plants, Chinese national leaders' calligraphic inscription energized the growth of industrial productivity. The resonance between Trobrianders' gardening magic and Chinese calligraphic magic is not as inconceivable as one might think. In certain circumstances, influential politicians in China scatter the country's visual field with their calligraphic inscriptions in the same way that a magician casts a spell that immediately transforms the world in some way. Anything touched by the magic wand of calligraphy turns to gold. Shops, restaurants, monuments and imposing buildings receive this magic thanks to their calligraphic inscriptions, written by socially influential figures. In the glittering sunshine, as well as in the admiring eyes of the customers, these calligraphic words indeed glow with the lustre of gold.

We have now come to the end of the thesis. The moon, a fertile source of imagination for the Chinese, cannot be evaded in either the physical or the intellectual sense. Physically, she follows you wherever you run. Intellectually, she cannot be brushed aside until you stare her in the face. By the same token, the 'enchantment' of calligraphy[17] cannot be appreciated until one fully acknowledges its bewitching power as a social actor. Until one starts to look straight at the moon pointed at by the Chinese sage, rather than his finger, we cannot fully appreciate its 'enchantment'.

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[16] The differential efficacy of the agency of things, I suggest, can be applied to the whole range of objects in consideration. The making and employment of objects or artefacts in social action may all embody the intentionalities of the maker (person) to certain extent. However, different objects/artefacts do not transmit the network of intentionalities at equal efficiency. By the same token, the agency that objects later assume on their own do not have equal efficacy either. The differential efficacy of different objects can only be understood within their specific socio-cultural contexts. As a result, any analysis of the agency of objects implies an analysis of the social milieu where the objects are situated.

[17] Here, calligraphy is enchanting in both the religious and non-religious senses.

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