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Modernity and the Water Calligraphy Experience

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Abstract

This article explores how Chinese calligraphy has evolved in the modern world, utilizing one particular focus: water calligraphy. Water calligraphy is a fascinating, non-invasive, and communal form of street art. It recontextualizes traditional calligraphy and offers insight into modern Chinese society and the concepts of art and creation. The simple trade of ink and paper for water and the ground has produced one highly intriguing practice. The following article will go through water calligraphy's link to modernity, its general appeal, and my own personal experience attempting it.

Keywords: water calligraphy, Chinese society, tradition, community, recreation, art

The Basis of Water Calligraphy

Calligraphy has maintained a valuable role throughout the cultural history of China. With some of the earliest examples of Chinese calligraphy dating back 4,000 years, the roots certainly run deep. And since Chinese calligraphy has undergone a fascinating progression over the years—transforming through new scripts and varying applications and uses—it leaves one wondering: what developments has Chinese calligraphy arrived at in this current modern era? One could potentially look at the way calligraphy is presently taught in classrooms or perhaps examine ‘calligrapher’ as an occupation in current society or one could even simply explore which scripts are in use today. My research, however, led me to a more niche and distinct example of modern calligraphy: *dishu* (地书), ground calligraphy or, as it is most commonly referred to in English, *water calligraphy*. Water calligraphy is a form of recreational street art that recontextualizes the art of calligraphy in very interesting ways. At the basis of it, it is calligraphy with pavement as paper and water as ink. There is much to investigate in the world of water calligraphy and many different approaches and lenses to investigate it through, but this paper seeks to answer the following: *what is water calligraphy’s link to modernity?* and *what is the appeal of water calligraphy?*

My findings begin with Laura Vermeeren’s book, *Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China*. The book has a chapter dedicated to water calligraphy, titled *Evaporating Ennui: Water Calligraphy in Beijing*, where Vermeeren documents her observations of its practice in the parks of Beijing. Vermeeren spent several months in 2015 and 2016 focusing on Ditan and Taoranting Park, found in the south-western corner within the second ring of Beijing. Vermeeren (2019) cites, “both parks are frequented by a loosely formed group of around fifteen water calligraphers. The larger part of this group is male, and all of them are retired, ranging from the ages 55 to 81. Most of them come every morning for a couple of hours, some of them at least a few times a week” (p. 123). Over the months, these are the people that she watched, conversed with, and learned from. Through this ethnographic process, Vermeeren was able to uncover a lot regarding water calligraphy as an appealing form of traditional Chinese calligraphy and as a modern social and cultural phenomenon.

Water Calligraphy’s Legitimacy

Upon reading through Vermeeren’s findings, one notion that became clear is that to look at water calligraphy in relation to modernity, it is crucial to first acknowledge its adherence to long-standing traditions. After all, one of the most important aspects of water calligraphy is that it can be classified as a true form of Chinese calligraphy to begin with. Vermeeren writes the following, “although ink is exchanged for water and expensive brushes and paper for trash-brushes and tiles, I observed that the stylistic rules of Chinese calligraphy are seldom negotiated” (p. 124). And this is absolutely true. The people who partake in water calligraphy take it seriously, and one example is the use of traditional characters as opposed to simplified ones. Typically, official works of Chinese calligraphy consist solely of traditional characters, and water calligraphy is no different in that sense. The styles and scripts being used also reflect the value of tradition, as the calligraphers execute the proper strokes and shapes to align with the official scripts. In many cases, water calligraphers feel drawn to the running script (*xíngshū*, 行书) and grass/cursive script (*cǎoshū*, 草书) because the free-flowing motions of those particular

scripts emulate the flow of water, as seen in figure 1 below. The attention to tradition in water calligraphy is highlighted by the content and subject matter, as well. As with normal Chinese calligraphers, water calligraphers mainly write poems and proverbs.



Figure 1. Running script in Ditan Park, Beijing

To further emphasize the officiality of it all, one must look no further than the nationwide system of water calligraphy associations. In his book, *Dishu: Ground Calligraphy in China*, Francois Chastanet (2013) estimates that there are likely several millions of people who are now writing water calligraphy in parks across China. And Laura Vermeeren cites that Xue Fengli, the Vice President of the Water Calligraphy Association of Beijing in Taoranting Park, estimates that about ten thousand water calligraphers are registered at the various local water calligraphy associations that exist in the country (p. 123). These associations even convene annually in October for an official water calligraphy competition in Taoranting Park in Beijing, with pre-selections conducted in 26 different cities nationwide. With examples like that, it becomes quite clear that water calligraphy is a genuine and respected form of Chinese calligraphy. From there, its relationship with modernity can be explored.

A Modern form of Tradition

The practice of water calligraphy emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, after the Reform and Opening-up policy was introduced. This policy very much marked a new, modern era of Chinese society, and likewise, water calligraphy was a new, contemporary art form. Some of the specifics of the Reform and Opening-up policy begin to showcase why it potentially has such a close link to water calligraphy. For example, some things that came about were an increase in employment, a more recent increase in the wage rate, and the redistribution policy and its effects which have included “strengthening the poverty alleviation program in rural areas, expanding the coverage and equalizing the provision of public services, raising mandatory minimum wages and relaxing household registration control over population migration” (Fang, Garnaut, & Song, 2018, pp. 5–6). Generally, there was an increase in quality of life. The “provision of public services” allowed for an increase in opportunities for recreation in public spaces which directly pertains to water calligraphy, since at its core it is a public recreational activity.

One other governmental development in this time period may have contributed to the emergence of water calligraphy. Tong Chen argues in her article, *Square Dancing in the Streets, Xuanhua, China*, that public exercise became popular as an unexpected result of the One Child Policy instituted in 1978. As the population of aging Chinese now often have only one child,

there are less children and grandchildren to look after, and therefore more free time to spend. Water calligraphy was one activity that arose to satisfy that extra time and energy. Again, it is quite apparent that water calligraphy is a result of modernity in Chinese society. Wendan Li (2009), author of *By Way Cf Conclusion: Chinese Calligraphy in the Modern Era*, summarizes it well, saying that since the 1980s, “with political reform in China and the liberalization of political control, the stable structure of Chinese culture is experiencing a radical transformation. On this fast track of modernization, great changes have occurred in the area of calligraphy” (p. 187). Li believes that while “the practical, daily functions of brush writing are becoming obsolete, the artistic nature of calligraphy has supplied enough life force for it not only to survive but also to prosper in modern society. This renewed vigor has led to a number of new developments, including ground calligraphy” (p. 187). Ground/water calligraphy truly is a representation of modernity. How, though, has it been able to establish such a popular presence in this modern era? In other words, why do so many find this particular calligraphy form so appealing?

Well-being and Artistic Enjoyment

It is of course imperative to mention that water calligraphy is primarily a mode of recreation, especially among the retired elderly population. Simply, it gives these people something pleasant and leisurely to do during their abundance of free time. The relatively young retirement age in China (50-55 for women and 55-60 for men) contributes to this free time that the ‘elderly’ have on their hands. One of the water calligraphers interviewed by Laura Vermeeren during her time in Beijing expressed, “This is just for fun! You have to do something when you get old, right?” (p. 121). In many ways, calligraphy is one of the best activities that they could be partaking in with its methodical, relaxing, and enriching nature. There is a notable element of physical wellness that is also being incorporated. Water calligraphy has all the merits of traditional calligraphy in terms of exercising fine motor skills and activating mental focus, and in addition to that, water calligraphy involves movement of the whole body. It is a good opportunity for light exercise and walking around; water calligraphers write from a standing position and move a fair bit since the works they create can be relatively large-scale, as “water calligraphers will occupy ten to a hundred square meters of park surface depending on the size of their characters” (Vermeeren, 2019, p. 124). Overall, it is a healthy and beneficial practice.

Another aspect of water calligraphy that contributes to its appeal is its impermanence (which also distinguishes it from traditional calligraphy, once again emphasizing its modern essence). The fact that the written characters are ephemeral, the fact that they fade away, gives water calligraphy a really beautiful, poignant, and poetic quality. It stands in contrast to traditional calligraphy where the objective is to create a written record, a physical product. The temporary nature of water calligraphy also alleviates some of the pressure of creation. The prospect of making mistakes is far less daunting when the mistakes will physically disappear if they do end up occurring. Water calligraphy can thus be very freeing and the initial jump into artistic immersion can be easy to make.

The Importance of Setting

It is also a highly accessible art form and practice. The casual setting helps in creating this accessibility. Water calligraphy is not taking place in a classroom or any official building, it is

taking place outside in a public park. In his *The Landscapes of China*, Seddon (1982) describes the beauty of Chinese public parks, explaining that essentially every large park “has several lakes, and every lake has sinuous banks, narrow reaches with footbridges, islands accessible by row-boats... There is also much brilliant public display -- fireworks, or a brass band playing on an island in the lake” (p. 129). The parks are lovely places to be and are therefore lovely places to practice calligraphy.

This immersion and interplay with nature and the outdoors that occurs is another appealing factor of water calligraphy. For example, sometimes sunshine and the shadows of tree branches will be cast across a stretch of pavement covered in water calligraphy. Instances like that can create really special sights and atmospheres that are extremely rare in traditional calligraphy where pieces are often kept indoors, framed and hung on a wall.

The Strengthening of Community

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the public park setting and of water calligraphy in general is its communal aspect. As explained by George Seddon (1982), Chinese parks “have a quite extraordinary capacity to absorb very large numbers of people without the appearance of crowding” (p. 129). The culture of water calligraphy allows for plenty of casual interactions with passersby simply visiting the park. Water calligraphers often gather small crowds of onlookers where impressions about the work can be shared and discussed and the calligraphers can explain their creations. There is also interaction and conversation between water calligraphers themselves, creating mutually beneficial relationships that would not occur elsewhere. One water calligrapher explained, “here we are all equal. Some of us are from the countryside, some of us used to be professors. Here we are each other’s classmate and teacher at the same time.” (Vermeeren, 2019, p. 125).

Overall, there is a really fascinating breaking down of social and economic barriers, as it does not require much money at all to partake in water calligraphy. There is no need for the continuous purchase of supplies like paper or ink and the writing tools are usually just hand-cut brushes made from sponges and broomsticks or umbrella sticks. Expensive lessons or prestigious education are not necessary either. Another one of the calligraphers interviewed by Laura Vermeeren exclaims, “Just buy a calligraphy book of Wang Xizhi to copy from for twenty yuan, and that is all you need. As long as you practice and persist, everybody can do it” (p. 126). One more interviewee recounts, “I did not finish high school, but now I can recite the Lanting Xu. Whenever I get the chance, I go (to the park to practice water calligraphy). First, they taught me how to write, and now we are all learning from each other. I feel so proud when people are passing by and compliment me on my writing” (p. 125). It is an encouraging example of a wide variety of people coming together to bond over art, distinguishing it from the majority of Chinese calligraphy’s history where the art form was often reserved for the educated and elite.

A Brief Synthesis

Chinese water calligraphy engages with history and tradition in a new and refreshing way that is casual, but also very celebratory and truly for the people and for the community. It might potentially be written off as a mere leisure activity for the elderly, but it does have its place in the progression of Chinese calligraphy as a practice and art form. In Laura Vermeeren’s *Evaporating*

Ennui: Water Calligraphy in Beijing chapter, she presents the following poem by water calligrapher, Huang Songbai, who expresses all these ideas concisely and wonderfully:

We wrote characters on oracle bones -- the immortal oracle script
We wrote characters on magnificent bronzes
We wrote on glorious paper
Today we boldly dip our brushes in clear water for our leisure
reside with poetic exuberance on the earth

This special type of calligraphy clearly offers a unique experience for the artist performing it. After going through all this research, I myself became intrigued to discover exactly what that experience is like. I was left wondering how it felt to write with water. How does it differ from writing with ink in terms of texture/feel, control, precision, etc.? The only way to answer, of course, was to attempt it myself.

My Personal Experience

In trying out water calligraphy, I found that a lot of the cultural context surrounding it came through during the experience. The modern element and newness of it made the act of writing into a delightful and exciting endeavor, and being in a pleasant outdoor setting absolutely heightened the experience. One thing I found surprising was that it felt as though very little was sacrificed in giving up the ink and paper. In terms of feel and motion, the similarities to traditional calligraphy were a lot more apparent than the differences. Laura Vermeeren observed “that the stylistic rules of Chinese calligraphy are seldom negotiated” in water calligraphy (p. 124). I can see now how these stylistic rules are able to be adhered to. For the most part, I felt as though I could easily employ the same techniques with water that I utilize when writing traditional calligraphy with ink and paper. If I were to get specific though, I did notice that the edges of the characters often bled or expanded slightly. I also noticed that certain surfaces worked better than others; stone/slate worked well along with light shades of wood. I also felt a slight decrease in precision because it was difficult to gauge how much the water would expand once on the surface. That expansion mostly occurred on the first stroke when the highest amount of water was on the brush.

In all, though, I would say that I found the practice to be incredibly soothing. I felt a sense of curiosity with every character, not knowing exactly how each one would turn out. I also had absolutely no fear of mistakes because mistakes would fade with no ink wasted. I felt a connection to the outdoor surroundings. I think I even felt more fluidity while writing with water than I do with ink simply because there was no need for apprehension. Figures 2 and 3 below showcase some of what I ended up producing in the process. Writing water calligraphy was a fascinating experience that I would recommend for anyone to incorporate into their lifestyle. In fact, I can even envision it being incorporated into school and educational settings. Water calligraphy would likely work on chalkboards of relatively light shades, allowing students and teachers to practice calligraphy inside a classroom in an engaging and stress-free manner. Spending a class outside writing water calligraphy would be enjoyable and greatly beneficial, as well. I believe that there is so much to appreciate and admire about this wonderfully innovative and charmingly casual form of traditional Chinese art and writing.



Figure 2. My Chinese name written by me with water



Figure 3. "Dao" written by me with water

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