

Calligraphy as a Resource in the East Asian Studies Curriculum

By Yu Li and Cheryl Crowley

Brush calligraphy, a fundamentally intercultural and interdisciplinary art form, can be extremely useful as a teaching tool in K-12 and undergraduate education about East Asia. The complexity of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean writing systems presents language instructors with formidable tasks in developing student literacy skills. For many students, however, the writing system is the major factor of their appeal.

Though brush calligraphy in its sophisticated forms requires considerable training and knowledge, at its most basic level, it has the capacity to offer a rewarding experience in creating visual art, even for beginners with little training in either an East Asian language or painting. This is true for students who, in a very short time, can learn enough to be able to create thoughtful and imaginative artwork. It is also true for instructors—even those who doubt their own level of mastery in calligraphy techniques—as it is possible to rely on excellent textbooks published in recent years, as well as a growing number of teaching materials available online.

In this essay, we show that it is possible to incorporate calligraphy into an East Asian Studies curriculum and that a creative, inquiry-driven approach to the study and teaching of brush calligraphy can be a great asset in helping East Asian Studies programs build connections across disciplines in innovative and stimulating ways. We draw on our experience teaching undergraduate courses at a university that is strong in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean studies but offers little in the way of fine arts classes or public collections of East Asian art. In recent years, our programs have been working to create greater cohesion between language courses and discipline-based classes that are taught in English. Calligraphy-related courses have presented a particularly successful way to achieve this goal.

We discuss three kinds of calligraphy-related courses: 1) an introductory studio class that focuses on brush writing training, 2) interdisciplinary courses that combine the study of the cultural and linguistic aspects of East Asian writing systems with hands-on practice, and 3) a freshman seminar where students study brush writing on campus and then teach it at a local community center.

Calligraphy-related courses can offer a range of benefits. First, they can enable students to make connections between the diverse fields of study included in interdisciplinary East Asia-related majors and minors. These courses can also offer students opportunities to extend the scope of their educations beyond the classroom by participating in projects that use their calligraphy knowledge and skills. Finally, they can present faculty an inviting platform for guest lectures and joint projects, fostering interdisciplinary dialogues. In short, brush calligraphy has great potential as a foundation for creative classroom pedagogy, enhanced cultural life and understanding of East Asia in the local community, and engaged public scholarship.

Designing an Introductory Studio Course

A course that introduces students to the basics of brush calligraphy is relatively straightforward to plan and implement. The materials required to practice brush calligraphy are simple and inexpensive, and in a single fourteen-week semester, students can progress quickly from learning the basic strokes of standard style (Chinese *kaishu*, Japanese *kaisho*) to producing elegant compositions typically ranging from four to ten characters in length.

TEXTBOOKS. There are numerous possibilities for textbooks. A particularly fine option is *Chinese Writing and Calligraphy* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009) by University of North Carolina Professor Wendan Li. This book offers an authoritative but highly accessible introduction to Chinese calligraphy. It includes not only historical background, analysis of character forms, and an overview of aesthetic appreciation of major styles, but also an array of elegant, gracefully written models for practice in the standard style. It is readily available from the publisher and from major online booksellers. Another is *Chinese Calligraphy* (Peking University Press, 2008) by Rebecca T. Hsieh and Richard Hsieh. It presents a thorough introduction to calligraphy's history and materials, as well as an extremely comprehensive set of practice models that would be sufficient for a semester-long course. *Chinese Calligraphy* is bilingual, with the Chinese and English texts printed on facing pages, making it a particularly good choice for instructors who would like to combine calligraphy study with advanced instruction in Chinese language. It is somewhat more difficult to find than Li's *Chinese Writing and Calligraphy* but is available through distributors specializing in Chinese books.

MATERIALS. Student calligraphers need the basic "Four Treasures" toolkit (brush, ink, ink grinding stone, and paper). Additionally, there are other things that make practice easier, such as a felt mat to protect one's desk and a paperweight, but these are not strictly necessary. While it is not always easy to purchase all the required materials at a local art supply store, they are available through online retailers. A list is included at the end of this article. If you live near a large urban center, bookstores that cater to readers of East Asian languages are another good place to look.

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT. Students in the studio course are asked to gain a basic mastery of techniques and procedures of brush calligraphy, especially a habit of consistent practice. Each week, students practice an average of four to six characters that contain the stroke that is the focus of the week. Self-assessment of weekly assignments that teach the fundamental strokes helps students to see calligraphy better—that is, to develop the ability to appreciate and evaluate it in terms of aesthetic form. Final projects require application of skills acquired throughout the semester, allowing students to experience the process of completing a single work suitable for public display. Assessment focuses on progress and completion of assignments, as well as appropriate use of technique.

Calligraphy and Critical Inquiry: Interdisciplinary Courses

Calligraphy is more than just practice of technique, however. Direct experience of brush writing is one of the methods by which students can enhance their understanding of ideas that might otherwise remain entirely theoretical or abstract. It can also provide a unifying theme around which to structure discussions on a wide range of topics related to East Asian art, culture, and society. The role of calligraphy in a given course can be limited to one class meeting or be the foundation of work that spans an entire semester.

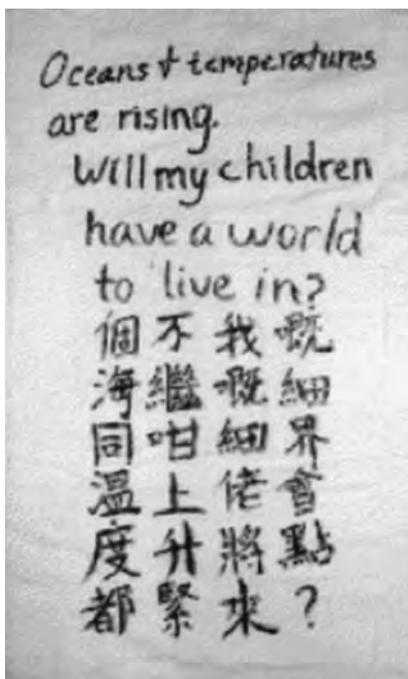


Figure 1. T-shirt Project: "Our Modern Oracle Bones."

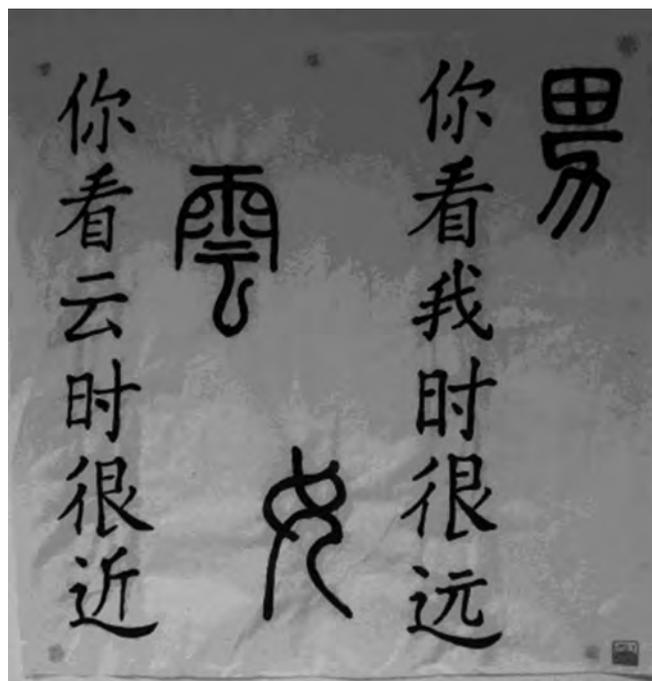


Figure 2. Emily Calvert, "Far and Near."

We developed two courses that use calligraphy to train students in critically examining ideas and issues in a range of disciplines in the humanities. One, a course on Chinese art, writing, and society, starts with introducing students to the immediate aspects of Chinese calligraphy as a traditional art form and then invites them to examine the aesthetic values, intellectual metaphors, and moral principles that Chinese calligraphy is said to manifest. Specific topics include the aesthetic principles of brush writing, writing and personhood, Buddhism and Confucianism, and Modernism and the avant-garde. The other course, centering on the Chinese writing system, takes a different approach. Here, students acquire an accurate linguistic understanding of the Chinese writing system and learn to apply their linguistic knowledge and skills to investigate the myths and misunderstandings concerning it. The writing system becomes a focal point around which to organize examinations of the relations between the Chinese script and language, literacy, technology, gender, ethnicity, literature, and art in and beyond Asia. In both courses, instruction methods include not only class discussions of reading assignments and conventional research papers but also student-created projects involving multimedia visualizations of the concepts discussed in class.

The following are examples of 1) an in-class assignment designed to help students better understand Chinese history through firsthand analysis of historical documents, 2) an in-class activity used as an exploration of religious practice, and 3) a final project assignment that invites students to create a visual expression of their theoretical understanding.

VISUALIZING HISTORICAL CHANGE THROUGH SCRIPT. The learning goal was for students to better understand the ways that change in Chinese technology, politics, and society were made visible in corresponding developments in the style of Chinese writing. Images of historical calligraphy works that represent the major script styles were presented, and students were asked to not only recognize these scripts and describe their key visual features, but also to relate those features to the materials and instruments used to write them. In doing so, students developed an understanding for how artistic creativity is conditioned by social and historical

factors. For example, the highly uniform characters of the small seal script were developed in the context of China's unification; the straight lines and varied stroke width of the clerical script grew out of the development of technology (ie, the invention of paper), while modern-day fountain-pen calligraphy, typing on computers, and altered textual layout all reflect the effects of globalization.

BUDDHISM AND CALLIGRAPHY. After readings and discussion that provided a basic overview of Buddhist teachings, the class explored Buddhist practice more deeply by trying their hands at *shakyō* (sutra copying) using a text of the *Prajnaparamita* (heart) *Sutra* specifically printed for this purpose. Afterward they were asked to comment on their impressions of this activity to the group, reflecting on the

relation (if any) between their physical experience of copying and their understanding of the highly challenging concept of "emptiness" that is the focus of the sutra.

FINAL PROJECT ASSIGNMENT. Students were asked to create an original artistic work that conveyed a meaningful message. The assignment was to start with a concept or a perspective that they learned in the course and develop it into a specific idea that they wanted to express. The description read as follows:

What are some of your insights regarding language, writing, and the multiple dimensions of culture that you have gained from working in this course? How would you like to inspire your audience with your insights? Possibilities of specific media are open. You can create a piece or artwork entirely from scratch or modify something that already exists. You can draw, paint, or sculpt. You can use mixed media. You can take photographs, write a song, or do a very short video. You can give a performance. You can even design a T-shirt. The key is not so much in the artwork itself as in the concept it embodies. Your work does not need to be pretty, but it needs to make people think.

Student projects have been varied and imaginative and have included textile art, digital animations, and sculptures created from recycled water bottles, as well as more conventional ink-and-paper hanging scrolls (Figures 1, 2, and 3). In these courses, calligraphy was just one aspect of learning and assessment. Unlike the studio course, with teaching technique as the main objective, these interdisciplinary courses used calligraphy as a visual and tactile means of supporting and reinforcing the ideas covered in reading assignments and class discussions.

Calligraphy and Character:

Community Service with the Brush

Calligraphy can also be a useful concept around which to design service-learning courses, that is to say, courses that combine academic study with reflective community outreach activities. A recent example is our seminar



Figure 3. Elsa Lake (untitled).

that partnered undergraduates with elders at a community center. For the freshmen, the focus of the course was exploration of value systems, ethics, and community building. We used calligraphy as a means to help students better understand course content through embodied practice and as part of a project of compassionate engagement with the community outside campus boundaries.

The course combined discussions of major texts of the premodern East Asian philosophical and ethical tradition in translation, eg, *Lunyu (Analects)*, *Zhuangzi*, *Daxue (Great Learning)*, calligraphy assignments, and once-weekly visits to the English-as-a-second-language class for refugee elders hosted at a nearby community center. The freshmen students were in their late teens and early twenties—all newcomers to college life; the community center students were elder survivors of racial and ethnic conflicts from a variety of national and linguistic backgrounds. We asked the freshmen to help teach brush calligraphy to the ESL students and in the process simply talk with them; calligraphy was not just an end in itself but a means to start conversation and build relationships. Students followed up on their visits with reflection journal blog posts in which they considered the relationship between their growing knowledge of East Asian philosophies to their experiences in community activity. At the end of the course, the students' final projects were shown at a group exhibition at the community center.

Students' reflection journals attested to the ways that the class provided them with insights into working to improve themselves and their community. One student commented:

This class and calligraphy have taught me that I must find balance and harmony in the things I do and the relationships I have in order to make the best of life.

Another wrote:

Calligraphy allows me to be still in this ongoing and busy society. Sometimes we must stop everything we are doing and absorb the silence and the inactivity, because through this, we can notice things we have never noticed before and see things we have never seen before. Through calligraphy, I can inspect my inner feelings and meditate on nothing else but the strokes and my thoughts. Calligraphy is a tool I use to share my benevolence with others, such as the [senior refugee] students at the [community center].

To conclude, brush calligraphy can be approached not only as the aesthetic activity that it unarguably is but can also be contextualized within the disciplinary and pedagogical frameworks offered by linguistics, cultural history, ethics, and engaged learning. It can serve as a means to help students acquire tools for critical thinking and cultural and linguistic understanding of East Asia, as well as an appreciation of the techniques of brush writing. Finally, it provides a platform for inquiry into the arts and humanities in general in a way that is accessible to all practitioners, irrespective of language ability and cultural background. ■

TEXTBOOK RESOURCES

Hsieh, Rebecca T., and Richard Hsieh. *Chinese Calligraphy: Xuexi Zhongguo Shufa*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008.

Li, Wendan. *Chinese Writing and Calligraphy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Barrass, Gordon S. *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Chiang, Yee. *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetics and Technique*, 3rd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974.

Elman, Benjamin A. "Language, Classicism, Calligraphy, and Cultural Reproduction." *A Cultural History of Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Ericson, Britta. *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words: the Art of Xu Bing*. Washington, DC: Sackler Gallery, 2001.

Gaur, Albertine. *A History of Calligraphy*. London: British Library, 1994.

Hamlish, Tamara. "Calligraphy, Gender and Chinese Nationalism." *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. Edited by Tamar Mayer. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Kraus, Richard C. *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Murck, Alfreda, and Wen C. Fong, eds. *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.

Silbergeld, Jerome and C. Y. Ching, eds. *Persistence-Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Stevens, John. *Sacred Calligraphy of the East*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1996.

Yen, Yueh-Ping. *Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary Chinese Society*. Routledge, 2005.

Zhongshi Ouyang, Wen C. Fong, and Youfen Wang. *Chinese Calligraphy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

SUPPLIER WEBSITES

Oriental Art Supply, <http://www.orientalartsupply.com/>.

Nadje Van Ghelue, The Art of Calligraphy, <http://www.theartofcalligraphy.com/>.

May Wang, The Chinese Calligraphist, <http://thechinesecalligraphist.com/>.

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YU LI is a Lecturer of Chinese and Linguistics at Emory University. She has developed and taught two courses related to the visual art of writing: Chinese art, culture and society through calligraphy, and Chinese writing systems in Asia. One of her current projects uses a linguistic approach to examine the use of written symbols in contemporary Chinese art and aims to tease apart the complex relationships between the Chinese language and its writing system ingrained in the cultural (un)consciousness of the artists and their audience.