



THE AESTHETICS OF SCRIPTS
The Intersection of Form,
Perception, and Meaning



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WORKSHOP The Aesthetics of Scripts

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I N S C R I B E
INVENTION OF SCRIPTS
AND THEIR BEGINNINGS



NEW FORMS OF CALLIGRAPHY IN CHINA:
A CONTEMPORARY CULTURE MIRROR



COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Wang Haicheng, University of Washington

Beautiful Writing in Comparative Perspective

This talk compares beautiful writing in China with beautiful writing in other early civilizations, focusing less on content than on context, function, artistic character, and artistic status. Why has beautiful writing mattered more in some traditions than in others, sometimes ranking as the highest of the arts, sometimes scarcely being thought of as an art at all? To what extent were the different fates of fine writing determined by artistic potentials inherent in some writing systems but not others, by different writing media, and by cultural forces or historical accidents?

Marcello Ghilardi, University of Padova

Writing Meaning Living. A Philosophical Approach to the Sino-Japanese Script

Through the perspective that is presented here, the forms of writing do not emerge as a final result of the adaptation of manual movement to a mental image. There is no mimetic relationship between exterior and interior nor, viceversa, between a defined internal image and its visible realization. The image arises from the heart-mind at the same time as it is expressed gesturally. In both Chinese and Japanese "calligraphic" traditions, the heart-mind (心) to the hand, from the brush to the ink, the process is continuous: there is a modification-transformation (造化) of the flux (气), the vital energy that circulates and implements the body-mind (心身) and which translates into the rhythmic pulsation of the written form. The works of Shitao (1642-1708) are icastic examples to show how the artist's heart-mind, the ink, the brush and the paper transform and give life to each other, in a relational development that releases the potential of these interconnected elements. A common thread is followed, in order to give birth to a cosmogonic action that conveys a "meaning" - or a possible harmony between the "self" and the world - even beyond the semantic aspect of sinographs.





COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Marco Meccarelli, University of Catania

The Shared Gesture: Exploring the Nexus Between Chinese Calligraphy and Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism

This presentation delves into the shared gestural qualities between Chinese calligraphy and Western artistic movements such as Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism. By examining the dynamic brushwork, spontaneous gestures, and emphasis on personal expression in both traditions, we explore the cultural and aesthetic connections that transcend geographical boundaries. Through this comparative analysis, we uncover the universal language of artistic expression, where ink meets canvas in a symphony of movement and emotion.

CASE STUDIES

Paola Demattè, Rhode Island School of Design

Colors and Forms: The Aesthetics of Ancient Chinese Writing

Though much has been written about the aesthetic qualities of historic Chinese calligraphy, early Chinese writing has not received comparable attention. Yet, since the beginning of Chinese graphic production in the Late Neolithic and in the Bronze Age, it is clear that writers of early signs and inscriptions were motivated by aesthetic concerns similar to those of the authors of later historic calligraphy. These aesthetic concerns included balance of form, shape of strokes, arrangement of signs as well as choice of writing surface, technique and most importantly color. However, it is significant that these aesthetic choices were also driven by an intent to signify differences.



CASE STUDIES

Ludovica Ottaviano, University of Bologna

The Aesthetic Qualities of the Chinese Oracle Bone Inscriptions

This presentation explores the aesthetic qualities of Oracle Bone Inscriptions of the late Shang Period (c. 1250-1046 BCE), the earliest attested Chinese writing system. While the calligraphic features of these inscriptions are often recognized for their utility in dating the bones, their intrinsic aesthetic attributes and the aesthetic intentions of the ancient scribes are less frequently discussed, especially when compared to the traditional art of Chinese calligraphy. This presentation examines the interplay between visual, perceptual, and semantic dimensions in these inscriptions, focusing on their morphological characteristics—such as graph size, line quality, structure, symmetry, complexity, and typicality—and the overall layout. The aim is to explore how these visual elements influence the perception of beauty and convey differentiated meanings, contributing to our understanding of the foundational aspects of Chinese script evolution.

Federica Mirra, Birmingham City University

Water Calligraphy: Aesthetics Encounters Across China's Southwestern Cities in the 21st Century

This presentation will examine the practice of water calligraphy (*dishu*), which consists of writing Chinese characters on the ground through water and brush in urban, public spaces. This activity is particularly popular in China among retired men and can regularly be spotted in parks and squares across the city. In this presentation, I will identify the overlaps and differences between traditional calligraphy (*shufa*) and water calligraphy and suggest that the latter can be interpreted as a new calligraphic expression. Specifically, *dishu* has the potential to expand longstanding aesthetic principles and advance an aesthetics based on publicness, ephemerality and ordinariness against China's spectacular and fast urban rhythms. This paper will be developed through participant observation and informal exchanges with water calligraphers across Changsha, Guiyang, Kunming and Chongqing between 2023 – 24, critical theory and philosophical investigation, and qualitative, empirical visual analysis. Overall, this paper demonstrates that water calligraphy can contribute to the growing discourse around living aesthetics by favouring sensual encounters within the familiar, collective, and slow-paced everyday in a non-western context.



CASE STUDIES

Daniele Caccin, University of Bologna

Chinese Calligraphy Meets Multimedia Art: Exploring Digital Innovation and Tradition in Contemporary Expression

This paper investigates the experimentation of materials and the intersection of digital technology within the realm of Chinese modern calligraphic art. Departing from the days when calligraphy was confined to paper and ink, this art form is discovering an increasingly broad spectrum of possibilities for artistic expression, due to the enormous influence exerted by the digital trend. Notable examples can be seen in the artistic production of the calligrapher-artist Wang Dongling who merges elements of tradition and innovation. Moreover, several artists are actively engaged in “multimedia calligraphy” (Feng Mengbo, Zheng Guogu, Wang Tiande), employing installations, photographs, videos, digital techniques and softwares. Through the analysis of multimedia and digital artworks exemplifying the enhancement of traditional forms with the integration of digital mediums, this paper aims to demonstrate how this trend of experimentation facilitated by digital technologies reflects a modern hybridization of calligraphy, enabling the global dissemination of and accessibility to this art.

