

Calligraphy and Modern Chinese Writers

Li Jikai

College of Chinese Language and Literature, Shaanxi Normal University

迄今为止，中国现代文学研究已取得了举世瞩目的成就，但趋于“饱和”的状态也使其陷入了举步维艰的境地。因此，寻找新的学术增长点就变得异常重要和紧迫。

“书法文化”与“中国现代作家”的关系，几近是一个研究空白，以往很少引人注意，这是令人遗憾的。事实上，许多中国现代作家都与书法文化有着不解之缘，他们在书法收藏、书法创作、书学探讨上都做出了重要贡献；反过来，书法文化也对现代文学的存在方式、文本形式、情感表达、思维方式以及审美趣味等产生了深刻的影响。另外，通过对书法文化与中国现代作家关系的考察，还可引发我们进一步深入思考文学、书法、文化、教育等相关问题，以便有助于新世纪的中国文学和文化获得更大的发展空间。

关键词：书法文化 中国现代作家 学术创新 第三种文本 书学

Research on modern Chinese literature has achieved results that have attracted wide attention. However, its state of near “saturation” has placed it in a dilemma with no clear way forward. Finding new academic growth points has become exceptionally important and urgent. The relationship between the “culture of calligraphy” and “modern Chinese writers” is virtually a research blank and has so far attracted regrettably little attention. In fact, many modern Chinese writers have had close ties with calligraphy, making important contributions to its collection, creation and scholarly exploration. Conversely, the culture of calligraphy has exerted a profound influence on such things as the mode of existence, textual forms, emotional expression, ways of thought and aesthetic tastes of modern literature. Moreover, an examination of this relationship may stimulate us to reflect more deeply on literature, calligraphy, culture, education and related issues, which may help us gain a larger space for the development of Chinese culture and literature in the new century.

Keywords: culture of calligraphy, modern Chinese writers, academic innovation, third text, study of calligraphy

Recent research on modern Chinese literature has seen remarkable progress. However, much

ISSN 0252-9203

© 2011 Social Sciences in China Press

DOI: 10.1080/02529203.2011.548928

<http://www.informaworld.com>

of this progress has been offset by an increasing tendency toward “saturation.” More recently, scholars have begun to explore new points of growth in modern Chinese literature, yet there are still some areas that warrant more academic attention, such as the relationship between “calligraphy” and “modern Chinese literature.” This study aims to approach modern Chinese writers from the point of view of “calligraphy,” showing both their contribution to Chinese calligraphy and the profound effect calligraphy had on them. The study also offers reflections on some deeper issues in literary and calligraphic creation, with a view to facilitating the development of Chinese literature and culture in the new century.

I. A Neglected Area of Study

Modern Chinese writers were strongly influenced by their cultural unconscious and often found it hard to resist the attraction of traditional literature and art at the emotional and aesthetic level, even though, amid the contradictions of cultural psychology, their rational minds were resolutely radical. It did not then occur to anybody that although ideas of enlightenment and literary tastes might undergo dramatic change, the calligraphy brush had not “gone with the wind” but remained the main writing tool for many writers, and the calligraphic culture it conveyed followed the writers like their shadow.

Due to their early training and exposure to traditional calligraphy, most modern Chinese writers, whether calligraphers or not, had a natural link with calligraphic culture. For instance, Yu Pingbo was an apt pupil of his great-grandfather, Yu Yue, and was steeped in the culture of calligraphy; Mao Dun began to practice calligraphy in early childhood because of his grandfather, who was passionate about calligraphy; and Tai Jingnong’s fondness for calligraphy developed largely as a result of immersion in the subject under the tutelage from his father, who was a calligrapher and collector of calligraphy. Liang Shiqiu used to go to school with his ink box and inkstone and spent hours copying model specimens of calligraphy; even after he entered Tsinghua University, his father was constantly urging him to practice calligraphy. Ye Shengtao learnt to read and draw characters at the age of four and began to compose essays in regular small script at eight, exercises that played a critical part in his subsequent practice of calligraphy. Shen Congwen’s interest in calligraphy owed much to his early exposure to Chinese calligraphy in rural West Hunan and in the army, from which he derived lifelong benefits...In fact, the “six masters of modern Chinese literature”—Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She and Cao Yu—all had a calligraphic education in their youth and most were highly accomplished in this art. Other famous writers, such as Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren, Shen Yinmo, Lin Yutang, Yu Dafu, Feng Zikai, Zheng Zhenduo, Zhao Shuli, Zhang Henshui, Wen Yiduo and Wuming Shi (Mr Anonymous), also evinced a keen interest in calligraphy and showed an uncommon talent for it. Celebrated writers and scholars of the late Qing and early Republican period, such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, Zhang Taiyan, Lin Shu, Li Shutong and Su Manshu, were also

widely acclaimed for their calligraphy. Even women writers such as Bing Xin, Zhao Qingge, Ling Shuhua, Feng Yuanjun and Lin Huiyin never laid down their brushes; they became well known for their elegant, natural and easy calligraphy. It can thus be said that modern Chinese writers bridged the gap between ancient and modern Chinese literature and culture, in that they had been steeped in calligraphic culture from their youth and never abandoned the brush thereafter. Thus their ties to calligraphy were unbroken and their own calligraphy became a precious cultural heritage.

And yet this cultural heritage has long escaped academic attention. Research work in this field, if any, is largely sporadic, and remains confined to introductory texts or reviews of a particular writer, with no macro-level, systematic, in-depth exploration, still less any research treating the subject as a literary or cultural phenomenon. This means that part of modern China's valuable cultural heritage has been relegated to historical oblivion. Why? I believe there are several reasons.

The first has to do with the values and preconceptions of modern Chinese writers and scholars. Since new modern literature is based on criticism, selective adoption or even rejection of the old traditional literature and is premised on learning from modern Western literature and culture, the superiority of the new over the old, the Western over the Chinese, and the advanced over the backward was seen as self-evident. Naturally, as a result, traditional Chinese calligraphy became something to be ignored and transcended! Thus, in talking about modern Chinese writers and literature, it is natural to focus more on their contribution to vernacular literature itself and to the acceptance of foreign literature, while ignoring and even deliberately avoiding the close connection between modern literature and indigenous traditional culture, including old literary forms and calligraphy; for to recognize the influence of calligraphy on modern writers was tantamount to proclaiming their lack of modernity. Even well into the 1990s, there were still people arguing that "being overly attached to one's cultural inheritance, wasting too much time, and over-emphasizing form and detail—all these characteristics of brush culture demonstrate the collective personality of traditional Chinese literati. Overall, these features should be dying out."¹

The second reason can be ascribed to strict disciplinary divisions and the lack of a holistic approach in academic research. Over the last century and more, Chinese scholarship has been learning from the West in academic thought and culture and has gradually moved toward greater rigor, more detailed analysis and an empirical approach. This is good in itself. However, in increasing disciplinary divergence and fragmentation, this trend also does away with the holistic approach of traditional Chinese scholarship in a way that is harmful to academic development. The same is true of literature and calligraphy. In ancient China, literature and calligraphy were complementary and mutually indispensable. But in modern times, they separated and even completely parted company. A calligrapher can copy other people's work without necessarily becoming a writer and writers usually see calligraphy

1 Yu Qiuyu, "A Lament for Brush and Ink," p. 265.

as a mere tool, with no great enthusiasm for its finer points; hence the split between calligraphy and literature. It is therefore little wonder that calligraphers often look down on the calligraphy of modern writers, with some even suggesting that “calligraphy was cold-shouldered in the Republican period.”² Given that calligraphers think little of the calligraphy (including writers’ calligraphy) produced since 1911, it is no surprise that the subject has been neglected by writers and scholars.

The third is directly related to the inadequacy of research on the “relationship between writers and calligraphy.” The establishment of concepts, values and methodologies is even more essential to academic research than accumulation of material, intellectual stimulus and guidance. Due to the continued lack of attention to “calligraphy” over the past century on the part of modern Chinese writers, scholarly neglect has become inevitable. Moreover, as examples of the “calligraphy” of modern Chinese writers are scattered across a wide variety of materials, including old newspapers, memoirs, diaries or biographies, it is hard to collect them and still harder to distinguish the true from the false. There can be no doubt that this poses a further obstacle to scientific research, for there are now few scholars who would undertake such research, especially when it involves quietly beaver away to unearth primary sources.

The last reason also has to do with the deficient knowledge structure of twentieth century Chinese scholars, particularly contemporary Chinese scholars. Due to their proximity in time, many scholars in the first half of the twentieth century found it hard to see their writer contemporaries in terms of “calligraphy,” although they themselves were highly accomplished in this field; and in the second half of the twentieth century, although temporal distance enabled an aesthetic examination across time and space, the estrangement of scholars from calligraphy formed another natural barrier. Just imagine how hard it is for the calligraphy of modern Chinese writers to evoke empathy among scholars who are devoid of any knowledge structure and aesthetic consciousness in relation to “calligraphic culture.” This is true of those scholars born during the Cultural Revolution, and even more so of those born in the 1980s and 1990s, who have abandoned the pen for the keyboard.

Now that the relationship between modern Chinese writers and calligraphy is emerging from the historical shadows, the previous idea that Western values were the standard and traditional Chinese culture was “conservative” has been revised. Recently, researchers have been looking into the profound influence of *A Dream of the Red Mansions* (红楼梦) on modern Chinese writers, arguing that it served as an alternative source for the emergence of new Chinese literature, in addition to Western literature and culture.³ Others have made the old-style poetry composed in the modern era their object of study, exploring the modern

2 Li Yi and Liu Zongchao, *A Collection of Calligraphic Works since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*, p. 3.

3 For details, see Wang Zhaosheng, “*Dream of the Red Mansions* and Twentieth Century Chinese Literature.”

elements therein.⁴ In this sense, it is both ideologically and methodologically significant to explore the relationship between “calligraphy” and modern Chinese writers, as it opens up a new area of study left in oblivion for too long.

II. “Calligraphic” Contributions of Modern Chinese Writers

I argue here that modern Chinese writers have made great contributions to the accumulation and creation of “calligraphic culture,” contributions that deserve due attention and appraisal.

Modern Chinese writers played a major part in carrying on the legacy of traditional Chinese culture through their passion for the art of calligraphy and their interest in collecting it. For instance Liang Qichao, whose life spanned the late Qing and the modern era, saw the collection of stele rubbings as an important calligraphic activity. Over his lifetime, Liang collected a total of 1,284 stone and bronze rubbings, covering nearly every dynasty and a great variety of writing styles and inscriptions. Lu Xun can be taken as another representative collector. He not only boasted a large collection of rubbings of inscriptions but had devoted himself to copying such inscriptions in his youth, an activity that laid a solid groundwork for his calligraphic proficiency. Others such as Guo Moruo, Zheng Zhenduo, A Ying, Lin Yutang, Zang Kejia, Bing Xin and Lao She were also celebrated for their collections of works by famous calligraphers. Bing Xin, for example, collected and preserved the example of Liang Qichao’s calligraphy that runs “I shall not change my mind though the world changes; in dreams, I spread my wings and fly over the sea” (世事沧桑心事定，胸中海岳梦中飞), thus enabling this masterpiece to come down to us today. Liu Bannong was at one time an enthusiastic collector of vernacular poetry written around the time of the May Fourth Movement; the poems were later compiled as *A Collection of Vernacular Poems in Early Republican China*, produced using photo-offset printing by Beiping Xingyuntang Book Company in 1933. This volume thus preserved in part the calligraphic record of the period. From the point of view of preserving calligraphic culture, writers’ collections of their own or others’ calligraphy can promote the continuation and appreciation of traditional Chinese calligraphy and that of modern Chinese writers. Through the “associations evoked” and resultant “contrapuntal stimulus,”⁵ these visual works with an anthropological flavor provide a source of spiritual culture for the construction of contemporary civilization. In this sense, therefore, we should give due recognition to modern Chinese writers’ collections of calligraphy. It is fair to say that their endeavors have ensured that the history of Chinese calligraphy has flowed on uninterrupted.

Modern Chinese writers’ calligraphy has also added its own contribution to the history of Chinese calligraphy. Their calligraphy is generally tinged with a distinctive sense of

4 Chen Youkang, “The Legitimacy and Modernity of Old-style Chinese Poetry of the Twentieth Century.”

5 Wang Hailong, *Visual Anthropology*, p. 117.

individuality and of their era, evident in the following three characteristics. (1) A strong sense of social responsibility and historical mission. In traditional China, calligraphy was usually individualist, leisurely and reclusive. This is true of the personal letters of Wang Xianzhi and Yan Zhenqing, Wang Xizhi's "Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion," Mi Nangong's "Light Ink Poems" and so forth. However, the calligraphy of modern Chinese writers was quite different in that it often focused on such themes as the survival of the Chinese nation and the hard life of the common people. Examples include Li Dazhao's "Shoulders of iron bear the weight of justice, a sharp mind produces eloquence" (铁肩担道义, 妙手著文章), Lu Xun's "Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers; head bowed, like a willing ox I serve the children" (横眉冷对千夫指, 俯首甘为孺子牛) and Guo Moruo's "In the world of devastation arose the sage of poetry; under his pen unfold the hardships of the common people" (世上疮痍诗中圣哲, 民间疾苦笔底波澜). (2) A broad view of the world characterized by a global perspective, a cosmic consciousness and a marked sense of individualism and liberalism. Examples include Lin Yutang's "Straddling Eastern and Western culture, single-mindedly reviewing writings from all over the world" (两脚踏东西文化, 一心评宇宙文章), an approach unprecedented in terms of its breadth of vision and Yu Dafu's "Inebriated, I once (wrongly) whipped a fine steed; I fear my show of emotion may embroil my fair lady" (曾因酒醉鞭名马, 生怕情多累美人), which runs free and untrammelled, breaking through the orthodoxy of traditional Chinese calligraphy with unparalleled liberty and individuality. (3) The free expression of sequence, structure and style. Despite its stylistic variety, ancient Chinese calligraphy generally followed specific rules and formats. By contrast, modern Chinese calligraphy is freer and less rule-governed. For instance, Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi and Shen Yinmo all wrote the new poetry using brush and ink, but adopted a freer composition. Yu Dafu's calligraphy is highly individualistic, like a slovenly and tottering drunkard; other modern writers such as Lu Xun used modern punctuation marks in their calligraphy, and some even combined Chinese calligraphy with Japanese or English words, resulting in a creative "new calligraphy." Still others made the lines in their calligraphy run from top to bottom instead of right to left, and the words run from left to right instead of top to bottom. This creative form is particularly evident in the calligraphy of modern writers. Of course, modern Chinese writers displayed no lack of originality in their individual calligraphy. For example, to Guo Moruo, Lu Xun was a calligrapher who "smelts seal script and official script into one, and whose pen is obedient to his will." Shen Yinmo, a May Fourth poet and *New Youth* editor, was widely recognized in modern China as a master of calligraphy and Nie Gannu gave high praise to the famous modern scholar Xie Wuliang, saying "Over his lifetime, he has contributed significantly to his century through calligraphy and poetry. His calligraphy is so graceful and unrestrained that it is on everybody's lips."⁶ If we look at modern Chinese writers in terms of calligraphic culture or "greater literature," we find that many actually combine literature and calligraphy, thereby

6 Yu Zhen, "An Elegy for Xie Wuliang by Nie Gannu."

establishing a close and intricate relationship between the two. This relationship has had a lasting influence on social civilization, contemporary writers and the art of calligraphy. It also demonstrates that modern writers represent not only “the direction of new culture,” but also “the direction of carrying forward the fine elements of traditional culture.” In a word, modern Chinese writers’ calligraphy is significant in terms of its intellectual content, artistic form and aesthetic style and has contributed to the whole history of Chinese calligraphy.

Modern Chinese writers also made no common contribution to calligraphic theory or “the study of calligraphy.” From the late Qing onward, many writers and scholars made breakthroughs and innovations in talking about calligraphy. Among them, Kang Youwei’s *Expansion of Oars for the Boat of Art*, Liang Qichao’s *A Guide to Calligraphy* and Shen Yinmo’s *Five Keys to Calligraphy* are the most representative. Other impressive achievements of the period include Guo Moruo’s studies of ancient Chinese characters and calligraphy, Lin Yutang’s reviews of calligraphic culture, Yu Youren’s studies of cursive script, Zong Baihua’s aesthetics of calligraphy and Tai Jingnong’s exposition of the art of calligraphy, as well as relevant observations by Li Shutong, Shen Congwen, Qian Zhongshu, Luo Binji and Zhao Qingge. Their ideas on the aesthetics, values, techniques, criticism and dissemination of calligraphy call for further attention and inquiry. In general, the ideas of modern Chinese writers on calligraphy are significant in three respects. (1) Their revolutionary and creative consciousness. As early as the late Qing, Kang Youwei had advocated basing the study of calligraphy on stele inscriptions to break the dominance of the printed models used for millennia. He believed that stele inscriptions were beautiful in ten ways: they had a powerful soul, a majestic outlook, leaping strokes, bold and luscious dots, an unpredictable will, a soaring spirit, intense yet unaffected charm, a smooth and balanced body, a natural structure and rounded flesh. He embraced the idea of “change” in the study of calligraphy, arguing that “Everything in the universe is the result of change. People, too, incline toward change. Change is a constant, so what changes must succeed and what does not change must fail. Calligraphy is a case in point.”⁷ In a similar vein, Lu Xun also showed a keen interest in the study of stele inscriptions. At one time in the early Republican period, he “shut himself in his room and copied stele inscriptions.”⁸ Moreover, he maintained that ink brushes and steel-nibbed pens should be used interchangeably and that there was no need to stick rigidly to one. In fact, he himself used both; he used the brush at his old-style private school and at home, but the pen when he went to modern schools.⁹ His bold suggestion about using both writing instruments had a revolutionary significance at the time. (2) Viewing calligraphy in terms of aesthetics and religion. In the early twentieth century, Cai Yuanpei proposed that “Aesthetics should be adopted in place of religion.” Under his influence, many modern Chinese writers began to view calligraphy from the perspective of aesthetics and religion. Representative

7 Kang Youwei, *More on Oars for the Boat of Art*.

8 Lu Xun, “Preface to ‘Call to Arms’,” p. 148.

9 See Lu Xun, “On the Ink Brush and So On,” p. 393.

of this trend were Zong Baihua, Lin Yutang and Zhu Guangqian, who not only served as a link between the past and the future but went deep into the subject. Lin Yutang, for instance, noted that “Chinese calligraphy occupies a quite unique position in the history of world art. The brush is more subtle and sensitive than the pen.” Elsewhere, he said, “Thanks to the widespread adoption of the brush, calligraphy acquired a true artistic status that parallels that of painting...The standards of calligraphy are as rigorous as those of painting. As in other fields, the artistic accomplishment of a great calligrapher towers above the work of an ordinary mortal.” “It is probably only in calligraphy that we can gain a full view of the artistic soul of the Chinese nation.” “Calligraphy provided the Chinese people with a basic aesthetic; and it was through calligraphy that the Chinese began to learn such basic concepts as lines and shapes. Therefore, one cannot talk about Chinese art without understanding Chinese calligraphy and its artistic inspiration.”¹⁰ Zong Baihua expressed similar views, arguing that the reason Chinese writing could be a work of art was that “Chinese characters, if they are well written and the pen is wielded skillfully, can become a lifelike three-dimensional work of art.” As such, they can be a source of life, a dance, a piece of music.¹¹

(3) A comparative approach to China and the West. Owing to changing times, modern writers could take an even broader view, so that they could talk about Chinese calligraphy by cross-referencing to China and the West. For example, Lin Yutang believed that Western art often found its ideal and perfect rhythm in the female body, seeing women as a source of inspiration. By contrast, the Chinese reverence for rhythm began with the art of calligraphy. The rhythm represented by calligraphy is a highly abstract principle and calligraphy is a kind of abstract art. Thus, Chinese calligraphy can be explained in terms of abstract painting; it is a combination of abstract structure and natural rhythm.¹²

(4) Dialectical viewpoint and way of thinking. Due to the limitations of their era and their perspective, it was hard for the old Chinese calligraphers to acquire a global perspective and a dialectical way of thinking. Modern Chinese writers were more likely to be intellectually liberated as most of them had traveled the world and could draw on both Chinese and Western culture. For instance, Lin Yutang, while highly praising Chinese calligraphic art, also remarked that the traditional way of writing was a “double-edged sword” for China. Feng Zikai also noted that “The universe is a great work of art. Why should we confine ourselves to the lesser arts of calligraphy and painting while shutting our eyes to the great art work of the universe? Why should we not view the universe with the eyes of calligraphy and painting? If we do so, we will discover new worlds.”¹³

Since modern Chinese writers were situated in a transitional period between tradition and modernity and between East and West, most carried on the fine calligraphic tradition

10 Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People*, pp. 257-258 and 285.

11 Zong Baihua, “Spatial Awareness in Chinese and Western Paintings,” p. 256.

12 This idea proposed by Lin Yutang in 1936 has had a great influence on the “modern school” of Chinese calligraphy. See Liu Canming, *A History of Modern Chinese Calligraphy*, p. 200.

13 Feng Zikai, *The Ways of the World*, pp. 3-4.

of the old Chinese scholar-gentry, so that they had their own convictions, explorations and reflections on both the theory and the practice of calligraphy. This applies to both famous and obscure writers. However, many of their reflections are scattered through their literary works, theoretical studies and daily lives, an area that merits further exploration and research. The calligraphic contribution of modern Chinese writers is quite outstanding seen from the angle of “calligraphic culture,” though it is less so if seen from the angle of literature. This is consistent with the overall development of Chinese calligraphic art.

III. The Nourishment Provided by “Calligraphic Culture” to Modern Literature

Apart from the contribution of modern Chinese writers to calligraphic culture, we may turn the question round to ask what sustenance “calligraphic culture” has provided to modern Chinese writers and literature. In other words, what peculiar features or content has modern Chinese literature acquired as a result of the influence of calligraphic culture? Answering the above questions will make it easier for us to understand that modern Chinese writers and literature did not exist in isolation but amid rich diversity.

The layout and binding of works incorporating calligraphy has changed the appearance of modern Chinese literary periodicals and books and has become an important vehicle for artistic beauty and the writer’s soul. Due to the progress and convenience of modern printing, modern Chinese literary books and periodicals are attractively produced in a rich variety of formats. In this, “calligraphy” has played a significant role, as it could be said to have changed the way they look. Look, for example, at the cover art of some modern Chinese literary works. Titles written with the brush include Xu Zhenya’s *The Soul of Yu Li* (玉梨魂), Lu Xun’s *Call to Arms* (呐喊), Hu Shi’s *An Experimental Collection* (尝试集), Wen Yiduo’s *Red Candle* (红烛), Xu Zhimo’s *One Night in Florence* (翡冷翠的一夜), Mao Dun’s *Midnight* (子夜), Lin Yutang’s *The Great Wilderness* (大荒集), Lao She’s *Camel Xiangzi* (骆驼祥子), Zhu Ziqing’s *Traces* (踪迹), Chen Xiying’s *Xi Ying’s Idle Talks* (西滢闲话), Liang Shiqiu’s *Yashe Essays* (雅舍小品), Ling Shuhua’s *Flower Temple* (花之寺), Zhang Ailing’s *Legend* (传奇) and Bian Zhilin’s *Leaves of Three Autumns* (三秋草), to name just a few. This practice highlights the meaning and aesthetic orientation of these works. This use of calligraphy is even more evident in literary journals. For instance, the *Analects* (论语), a biweekly founded by Lin Yutang, made use of Zheng Xiaoxu’s style of calligraphy. In the first issue of *This Human World* (人间世), what met the reader’s eye was Zhou Zuoren’s calligraphy in *A Poem Celebrating My Fiftieth Birthday* (五十自寿诗), as well as the calligraphy of poems in reply by Cai Yuanpei and Lin Yutang, producing a strong visual impact. Other newspapers and journals, such as the *Ta Kung Pao Literary Supplement* (大公报·文艺副刊), *Morning Post Daily Supplement* (晨报副刊), *Short Story Monthly* (小说月报), *Creation Quarterly* (创造季刊), *Threads of Talk* (语丝), *The Wilderness* (莽原), *Cosmic Wind* (宇宙风), *July* (七月) and *Hope* (希望), all had titles written with the brush to convey particular cultural connotations, such as daring, prudence, creativity, modesty

or aspiration. Compared with print fonts or art characters, calligraphy was better able to convey editorial intention and display unconventional beauty and dynamism. Most notably, those titles written by the authors themselves not only evoked their inner feelings but were consistent with the style and aesthetic meaning of their work. For example, Lu Xun wrote the title *Wild Grass* (野草) himself, combining official and seal scripts with a new twist. Its elaborate and intricate strokes were highly illustrative of his complex, subtle, tenacious and mysterious mentality. The titles and headings in literary works and periodicals were as important as the name on a calling card. A layout incorporating calligraphy could bring a work to life and thus make it a part of literature and culture.

Writers' brush-written manuscripts changed the way modern literature exists, turning it into a hybrid of literature and calligraphy. In other words, most of the manuscripts left by modern writers are, as I see it, a hybrid "third text," an "alloy" of literature and calligraphy. From their extant manuscripts we can gain a view of the inherent link between literature and calligraphy and infer that the overall or greatest superiority of their calligraphy is to be found precisely in their manuscripts and personal letters, rather than in the rigid form of the couplets and central, vertical, horizontal and square scrolls to which the general run of calligraphers devoted themselves. In terms of dissemination and receptivity, readers usually pay more attention to the text as literature in printed works, whereas calligraphers generally see a calligraphic text made up of thick and thin brushstrokes. Naturally, both approaches have their limitations. But from the macro-level perspective, the writing subject and the calligraphic text are also "intermediaries" of history and culture. The text as literature and the text as calligraphy come together to create a "third text" that serves as an important and vital source for the sustainable development of "made in China" art and culture. If we take a micro-level view, we also become aware of the confluence of modern writers and calligraphic culture, a confluence that displays the characteristic and multiple cultural functions by which literature enters into calligraphy and calligraphy disseminates literature. We need not stop here. Due to its historical remoteness and the frequency of warfare, ancient Chinese literature rarely survived in the original. Very few of the manuscripts of ancient Chinese authors have survived and those that have are worth a king's ransom. By contrast, most of the manuscripts of modern Chinese literature were written with the brush. They are calligraphic literature or literary calligraphy in the true sense, for they bear traces of the writer's revisions, additions or deletions, as well as of the style of character and structural composition used. These manuscripts thus become living breathing fossils of incomparable value. Even in the small pieces casually tossed off by modern writers (such as their literary "essays"), the writer's artless art and rhapsodic brushstrokes mingle literature and calligraphy, taking them into another realm. The poetic passions within the strokes, their poetic world, mean that manuscripts in the author's own hand, alive with the author's innermost feelings, are "the most magnificent chapter in the epic of calligraphy."¹⁴ At present, a large number of modern writers' manuscripts are preserved

14 Zhang Hongchun, *An Appreciation of One Hundred Personal Letters*, p. 168.

in the National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature. From the plates in such formal publications as *A Bibliography of Modern Writers' Manuscripts* (现代作家手迹经眼录), *Calligraphy and Personalities of Intellectuals during the Republican Period* (民国文人书法性情), *A Collection of Manuscripts and Letters of Some Famous Modern Chinese Writers* (沧海往事: 中国现代著名作家书信集锦) and *The Calligraphy and Lives of Scholars of the Century* (旧墨二记·世纪学人的墨迹与往事) we can gain a glimpse of the variety and charm of these manuscripts. Nevertheless, I would argue that as society develops and older writers pass away, we should strengthen awareness of the need to rescue and preserve these cultural relics (including manuscripts), so as to better preserve literary works that take the form of "calligraphy."

The infiltration of calligraphic culture into modern Chinese literature has a direct bearing on the meaning, form, level and quality of literature. In "Poem Written for My Son Yu" the poet Lu You says, "When I first began to write poems, I tried to play with words to achieve a magnificent effect. It was not until middle age that I began to see the immensity of things... If you want to learn to write poetry, your efforts must be directed beyond poetry." We are not arguing here that calligraphic proficiency will produce good literature, but it can be said that calligraphy can indeed increase a writer's literary attainments and creation. This is why the ancients said "Reading maketh a full man." The view of literature that focuses on the creative subject has been inherited in the literary and calligraphic practice of modern writers; there are enough books and articles on the subject to fill a collection. In terms of the association between creative subjects' calligraphic attainment and their literary expression, we find that literary text and calligraphy usually correspond to and set off each other. For example, it has been argued that "Lu Xun's earlier collation of inscriptions...not only fostered habits of rigor and scrupulousness in collation, but also played a positive role."¹⁵ This rigor and scrupulousness is also reflected in Lu Xun's literary work. For instance, the tightly knit structure and composition of his novels remind us of the rigor of his collation work and his meticulous and carefully composed writing style. The classic example of this is *A Madman's Diary*, whose tight organization owes much to his earlier collation work. His masterly description of detail can also be regarded in this light. Mao Dun started with the regular script of Lu Runxiang of the Qing dynasty and then went further back to Jin and Tang dynasty inscriptions, among which those of Liu Gongquan, Ouyang Xun and Chu Suiliang and "Epitaph on the Tomb of Beautiful Lady Dong" had a particularly great influence on him. He studied hard from many teachers and gradually developed his own style of writing. His well-disciplined but seemingly loose calligraphic style, with its control and reserve, reminds us of his novel *Midnight*. No wonder people say, "It is not hard to tell from the manuscript of *Midnight* that Mao Dun took a rigorous and serious approach, with no trace of fancy. He would sit down to write after long deliberation, with the story present

15 Cao Juren, *A Critical Biography of Lu Xun*, p. 46.

in his head, and write without drawing breath.”¹⁶ Manuscripts allow us to see into a writer’s individual writing style and personality. For example, Zhou Zuoren and Wang Zengqi wrote a simple and elegant hand, like their works and even more like their personalities. In general, writers preferred running or cursive script to regular script. If we compare them, we find that only a few meticulous and rigorous writers, such as Lao She, Yu Pingbo, Ye Shaojun and Wang Tongzhao, were better at the regular script. As early as the 1940s, some literary editors noticed a correspondence between handwriting and temperament and between writing style and personality. For instance, “Yu Pingbo himself wrote his poem *Reminiscences* with the brush and had it printed by photo-offset, creating a combination of power and elegance. Yu’s good friend Zhu Ziqing, also known for his prose, was characteristically as simple and restrained in his brushstrokes as in his character. He wrote the postscript to *Reminiscences* in his own hand.”¹⁷ This also demonstrates that there is a high degree of correspondence between calligraphy and literature in terms of patterns of thought or artistic spirit, for there has always existed an aesthetic tendency toward “convergence” or “accommodation” in the Chinese system of art and culture. Calligraphy in particular can be combined with other forms of art in different degrees. For instance, many writers and scholars have regarded the harmonious mingling of calligraphy and literature as the most interesting of these compound creations. These associations are reflected in many ways. Writers may bring their artistic inspiration and images either into a literary text or into the world of calligraphy and art, while the aesthetic and creative experience of their calligraphy can also be transformed into a source of sustenance for literary creation. The quick wit, composition, images, imagination, density and rhythm and the elegance, wildness, vigor and vitality that calligraphers prize so highly also constitute the goals pursued by writers. For example, Zong Baihua made it a particular point that calligraphy should be “alive with emotion and personality” and, as the externalization of the calligrapher’s internal force, brushstrokes should be “powerful and striking, a force emerging from within. They need not have depth perspective, but should give a sense of three dimensionality with a force that stirs us.”¹⁸ This is consistent with his view of literature as conveying a sense of inner vitality.¹⁹ Wen Yiduo was also known for his accomplishments in poetry, calligraphy, painting and seal-making. In his “Calligraphy and Painting”, Wen proposes the idea that though calligraphy and painting have different origins, they merge in the one stream. This idea can also be seen in his widely influential principles for new poetry, “Three Beauties.” Wen’s own calligraphy and seal-making also took as a conscious aesthetic goal the harmony of the three beauties: the musical, the pictorial and the architectural (structural). Cheng Xiaoqing, a modern detective novelist, even “objectifies” his own passion

16 Liu Ping, “Mao Dun’s Manuscript of *Midnight*.”

17 Xu Diaofu (under the pen-name of Jia Zhaoming), “On the Calligraphy of Writers.”

18 Zong Baihua, “Some Important Issues in the History of Chinese Aesthetics,” p. 171.

19 Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House. *Twentieth Century Calligraphic Research: Criticism*, pp. 15-17.

for calligraphy and painting into the characters he writes about, thereby creating the popular literary icon of Yan Jiangnan. Both Guo Moruo and Mao Zedong were celebrated for the romanticism of their “poetic calligraphy” and literary works, which were interdependent and complementary.

IV. “Calligraphic Culture” and Contemporary Literary Ecology

Exploration of the relationship between “calligraphic culture” and modern Chinese writers is of academic significance in that this new area of study will bring us to a realization of the ecological diversity of modern Chinese literature and the history of calligraphy and literature contained therein, as well as the convergence of the two; at the same time, a grasp of the relationship between calligraphy and modern Chinese writers can also anchor us in contemporary Chinese literature while looking ahead to the prospects and fate of Chinese literature in the new century.

We can still see the legacy of “calligraphic culture” in contemporary Chinese writers. The tendency is more apparent in the older generation of writers since the May Fourth Movement, and less apparent in those writers of the “seventeen years (from 1949 to 1966),” who had been deeply influenced by the May Fourth movement. The former group includes Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Cao Yu, Lao She, Zhou Zuoren, Bing Xin, Ye Shengtao, Feng Zikai, Shen Congwen, Zang Kejia, Sun Li, Zhao Shuli, Qian Zhongshu and Tai Jingnong, who straddled two eras. They brought calligraphic culture directly to contemporary times, thereby enriching the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature. The latter includes Qin Mu, Liu Baiyu, Yang Shuo, Deng Tuo, Wang Zengqi, Zhou Erfu, Yao Xueyin and Xu Guangyao, who maintained some relationship with calligraphic culture by continuing to use the brush. However, with a new era, and particularly with the passing away of the older generation of writers, the younger generation of writers is increasingly faced with a desert with regard to “calligraphic culture.” Except for a few—Jia Pingwa, Feng Jikai, Zhang Xianliang, Xiong Zhaozheng and Wang Guozhen—who still retain some link with calligraphy, most are essentially isolated from it or even totally ignorant of it. Some writers can’t even write their names properly using the brush, let alone inscribe their work or write about calligraphy. This is a typical example of the “cultural deficit” among contemporary writers. It is even more alarming to see that writers of the 1980s generation and beyond have all but dropped the use of “the pen,” let alone “the brush,” and rely solely on keyboard and mouse in their literary production. For them, “calligraphy” has become something really remote.

In terms of the relationship between “calligraphy” and modern Chinese literature, to abandon “calligraphy” or “calligraphic culture” indicates, in a sense, the severing of a vital link with traditional Chinese culture. The long river of calligraphic culture will come to an end and literary works redolent of calligraphic culture will become impossible. The most direct result of all this will be the disappearance of calligraphically significant writers’

“manuscripts.” And conversely, the spirit and soul of calligraphy, along with its tranquility, simplicity and transcendence, will have little effect on writers. The natural affinity between calligraphy and literature is just like different types of stringed instruments that play in perfect harmony, or like the empathy between bosom friends. As early as the 1950s, Shen Yinmo wrote an essay on “Literary Reform and the Rise and Fall of Calligraphy,” addressing the underlying links between literature and calligraphy. In it, he stressed the contradictory yet symbiotic relationship between the two and expressed his faith in and concern for the fate of calligraphy. In a poem to Ding Ling written in his later years, Ye Shengtao said, “Holding the ink brush, continuing your earlier book, I still feel the warm glow in my heart...Our past relationship in letters predestined our present life.”²⁰ These intriguing lines call to mind the complex interrelationship of literature and calligraphy and the deep empathy between writers and calligraphers. Yu Qiuyu turned from his “Lament for Brush and Ink” to become a self-confessed and genuine “lover of calligraphy,” concluding that “The abstract and dynamic black strokes of calligraphic art form the sublime longitude and latitude of Chinese history.”²¹ Although one cannot ask that all Chinese should love calligraphy and take it up, it remains both necessary and urgent for us to encourage more Chinese, as descendants of an ancient culture, to love and practice calligraphy and more writers to understand and accept “calligraphic culture” in an era when the keyboard is rapidly taking the place of the pen. It is out of this concern that we call for more attention and greater effort from the field of literature and greater awareness from the field of calligraphy. The Chinese government should also issue a series of policies on education and culture, so as to boost China’s cultural soft power.

It is worth noting that we are talking about the contribution of calligraphy to modern Chinese writing in the general sense, that is, the sense of transcending our predecessors. In fact, if we apply more rigorous criteria, we will see that the “calligraphic culture” of modern Chinese writers typically has the following shortcomings. (1) A tendency toward secularization. From Kang Youwei on, modern Chinese writers usually wrote in the running or cursive script; few used the official, regular or seal script, and still fewer wrote in the stone drum or oracle bone script. Why? Because more people were pursuing the demotic, the casual, the convenient and the free and fewer aspired after elegance, restraint and veneration for antiquity. And when calligraphy, like literature, itself departs itself from elegance and becomes secular, calligraphic culture becomes devalued. (2) A lack of creative consciousness. Except for a few people like Kang Youwei, Shen Yinmo, Lu Xun, Mao Zedong and Guo Moruo, most modern Chinese writers lack a strong awareness of calligraphic creativity. They regard the brush as a tool for writing and see calligraphy as a way of putting down words or a form of communication between people, or even a kind of self-expression when you’re in the mood. As a consequence, calligraphic creation in the strict sense is barely visible and classic works of calligraphy that surpass their predecessors are rare. When it comes to contemporary

20 Zhang Xianghuan, *Ye Shengtao and His World*, p. 326.

21 Yu Qiuyu, *Asking to Learn: Talking about Chinese Culture with Peking University Students*, p. 208.

writers and writers of the new era, there is basically no calligraphic creation to speak of other than writing with the brush. Needless to say, calligraphy without a creative consciousness must lower the level of calligraphy and devalue literary manuscripts. This applies to modern Chinese writers, so it is not difficult to imagine what the contemporary writers, particularly those born after the 1950s, are like. Take, for example, Jia Pingwa and Feng Jikai, both well-known as calligraphers. Although they have produced numerous pieces of calligraphy, thus contributing to the carrying on of calligraphic tradition, its style and originality leave something to be desired. In this regard, Chinese literature in the new century should not only break through its neglect of and estrangement from “calligraphic culture” but should leave behind it the errors of modern Chinese writers, so as to establish a creative consciousness in calligraphy and come up with true calligraphic masterpieces that are out of the ordinary. Only in this way can contemporary Chinese literature and calligraphy integrate themselves with those of the ancients and rise to a higher level. Contemporary writers are duty bound to create “a calligraphy for the new literati,” in which they will constitute the main force.

We may take the relationship between calligraphy and modern Chinese writers a step further and reflect on ancient and modern or Western and Eastern culture, so as to construct a more healthy and holistic Chinese literature in the new century. From the monistic perspective of Western culture, Chinese calligraphy is totally insignificant. It may even become a major obstacle to Chinese literature and culture’s going out into the world; but from the perspective of cultural coexistence and mutual complementarity, Chinese calligraphy is indispensable, since it is a uniquely Chinese way of conceiving and understanding the world. The square pictographs of Chinese characters are the result of the interaction of the Chinese mind and the outside world; they are in themselves great creations and symbols of Chinese culture. Although the Chinese calligraphic tradition that arose from the profound merging of brushwork and “learning” has not yet totally disappeared in our era, thanks to the efforts of modern writers, it nevertheless confronts a grave crisis. The demotic and crude tendency found in many writers actually reflects their cultural deficit, a deficit that can partly be ascribed to their reckless abandonment of the brush and banishment of scholarly sentiment. In the contemporary cultural conflict between those contemporary writers who embrace calligraphic culture and those who are estranged from it, we can still discern in the laws of this conflict the prospects and hopes for Chinese literature and calligraphy and can believe that the exploration of writers and calligraphy will continue. In particular, sorting out and researching modern calligraphy, including the calligraphic works of writers, should receive more support from a variety of sources to enable us to retrieve and organize more material. We should not only establish the modern study of calligraphic documents but also exert ourselves to carry out the relevant research in “computer calligraphy.”

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, when China and the world turned their eyes on the West, modern Chinese writers did not give up the use of ink brushes; rather, they created literary and calligraphic works that were worthy of their times. In

the twenty-first century, when China also attracts the eyes of the outside world, there is all the more reason for Chinese writers to pick up their brushes, for laying aside or even abandoning “calligraphic culture,” in a sense, indicates a departure or estrangement from the essence and continuity of Chinese culture, or even its loss. In fact, in the applied area, we are situated in an era in which “ink brush” is being rapidly replaced by “keyboard.” Therefore, Chinese writers in the new century should particularly maintain a sober self-awareness and preserve their concern and their responsibilities.

Notes on Contributor

Li Jikai is professor and doctoral supervisor at the College of Chinese Language and Literature, Shaanxi Normal University. His main area of interest is modern and contemporary Chinese literature. His main publications include *National Spirit and the Chinese People* (民族魂与中国人, Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Education Press, 1996), *Shaanxi Fiction and Sanqin Culture* (秦地小说与三秦文化, Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House, 1997), *A Comparison of Lu Xun and Mao Dun from the Perspective of the Whole Person* (全人视境中的关照, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2009), *Creators of Chinese Culture in the Twentieth century* (20世纪中国文化的创造者, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2009), and a number of others. He has also published over 150 journal articles. Email: yjisl@snnu.edu.cn.

References

- Cao, Juren. *A Critical Biography of Lu Xun* (鲁迅评传). Shanghai: Oriental Publishing Center, 1999.
- Chen, Youkang. “The Legitimacy and Modernity of Old-style Chinese Poetry of the Twentieth Century” (20世纪中国旧体诗词的合法性和现代性). *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* (中国社会科学), 2005, no. 6.
- Feng, Zikai. *The Ways of the World* (人间情味). Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010.
- Kang, Youwei. *Expansion of Oars for the Boat of Art* (广艺舟双楫), vol. 34.
- Li, Yi and Liu Zongchao. *A Collection of Calligraphic Works since the Founding of the People's Republic of China* (共和国书法大系). Nanchang: Jiangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2009.
- Lin, Yutang. *My Country and My People* (中国人). Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 1988.
- Liu, Canming. *A History of Modern Chinese Calligraphy* (中国现代书法史). Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2010.
- Liu, Ping. “Mao Dun's Manuscript of *Midnight*” (茅盾的《子夜》手稿). *People's Daily Overseas Edition* (人民日报海外版), Nov. 4, 1997.
- Lu, Xun. “On the Ink Brush and So On” (论毛笔之类). In *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* (鲁迅全集), vol. 6. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1991.
- Lu, Xun. “Preface to ‘Call to Arms’” (呐喊·自序). In *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* (鲁迅全集), vol. 1. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1991.
- Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House. *Twentieth Century Calligraphic Research: Criticism* (二十世纪书法研究丛书·品鉴评论篇). Shanghai: Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy

- Publishing House, 2008.
- Wang, Hailong. *Visual Anthropology* (视觉人类学). Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing Group, 2007.
- Wang, Zhaosheng. "Dream of the Red Mansions and Twentieth Century Chinese Literature" (《红楼梦》与20世纪中国文学). *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* (中国社会科学), 2002, no. 3.
- Xu, Diaofu (under the pen-name of Jia Zhaoming). "On the Calligraphy of Writers" (闲话作家书法). *Panorama Monthly* (万象), no. 7, January 1944.
- Yu, Qiuyu. "A Lament for Brush and Ink" (笔墨祭). In *A Bitter Cultural Journey* (文化苦旅). Shanghai: Oriental Publishing Center, 1992.
- Yu, Qiuyu. *Asking to Learn: Talking about Chinese Culture with Peking University Students* (问学·余秋雨·与北大学生谈中国文化). Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press, 2009.
- Yu, Zhen. "An Elegy for Xie Wuliang by Nie Gannu" (聂绀弩诗挽谢无量). *Shanxi Literature* (山西文学), 2005, no. 4.
- Zhang, Hongchun. *An Appreciation of One Hundred Personal Letters* (手札100通欣赏). Shanghai: Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House, 2010.
- Zhang, Xianghuan. *Ye Shengtao and His World* (叶圣陶和他的世界). Shanghai: Shanghai Education Publishing House, 1995.
- Zong, Baihua. "Some Important Issues in the History of Chinese Aesthetics" (中国美学史中重要问题的初步探索). In *Collected Works of Modern Chinese Aestheticians: Zong Baihua* (中国现代美学名家文丛·宗白华卷). Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 2009.
- Zong, Baihua. "Spatial Awareness in Chinese and Western Paintings" (中西画法所表现的空间意识). In *Collected Works of Modern Chinese Aestheticians: Zong Baihua*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 2009.

—Translated by Wang Wen'e from
Zhongguo Shehui Kexue (中国社会科学), 2010, no. 4
Revised by Sally Borthwick