

Book Reviews

The Upright Brush: Ian Zhenqing's Calligraphy and Song Literati Politics.
By Amy McNair. University of Hawaii Press, 1998. 200p. US\$27.95

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Writing is technology. Writing structures thinking. Writing is a creative linguistic form that is fundamentally independent of — though bearing relation to — oral expression. That writing is not the mere correspondence of oral and written messages is the stuff of linguistic (Fishman 1977, Zuanelli-Sonino, 1989, Olson 1985) and anthropological studies (Cardona 1982, Goody 1987) which have informed us of this still much misunderstood fact. The anthropologist and historian of writing systems Goody (ibid.) while insisting that writing is more than coding (pre-existent) spoken language notes that writing is a means by which we have access to abstraction and abstract thought: literacy producing thought and not the other way round, writing preceding speech and not the other way round. Thus, the access to abstraction can be seen in the construction of lists, tables, formulae and many other organizing devices. Only the existence of writing (but not speech) enabled the notion of 'dictionary' to emerge.

In some contexts, the design of writing on the page becomes, as in the Arabic language, inseparably linked with the religion. The holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, played a central role in the development and evolution of Arabic script, and by extension, calligraphy. Today, calligraphy has become the most revered art form in the Islamic world because it links the literary heritage of the Arabic language with the religion of Islam.

The result of artistic attention to the process of writing itself (again we must add 'independent of the orality') is an artistic tradition of extraordinary beauty, richness and power. Calligraphy is an extremely demanding activity, and most of the great calligraphic masters devote their lives to perfecting their art. Typically, mastery of calligraphy requires not only the discipline of developing technical skill, but also the engagement of the calligrapher's moral force and personality. There are norms and deviances. There are historical and cultural hierarchies. There are organizations and social networks. A full linguistic anthropology of calligraphy has yet to be compiled.

For students of Chinese calligraphy the style of Yan Zhenqing (709–785) is paramount if not worthy of considerable attention. This is the case for historians as well as practitioners of those who practice Chinese calligraphy with the brush. His style is 'standard' and Chinese bookstores the world over contain his works which are presented as copybooks — the master's model. However, as the author of this scholarly and most interesting book points out, what one may find curious about this

situation is that Yan Zhenqing's style cannot be called especially attractive. "Upright, correct, severe, serious, and forceful are terms habitually applied to describe his style by traditional and modern critics, but rarely has it been called graceful or beautiful" (p. xiii)

Chapter 2 of Amy McNair's sophisticated treatment of 'the upright brush' (a felicitous title) begins with Yan Zhenqing's early career as a successful young literatus in and around the capital, Chang'an (modern Xi'an) and in Chapter 4 the reader follows Yan into exile and service in lowly posts far from the capital. Chapter 5 outlines Yan's resulting exile to the south and explains the circumstances surrounding his writing of the *Record of the Alter of the Immortal of Mount Magu*. This is followed by Chapter 6 which recounts how Yan Zhenqing arrived as prefect of Huzhou in 773, where he found congenial company writing poetry and working on his long-standing dictionary project with the monk poet Jiaoran (ca. 724–ca. 799), the tea expert Lu Yu (733–804), and others. In Chapter 7 Yan Zhenqing returns to court in 777, where he is named to a succession of high positions. In 780 he subsequently wrote a "grand summation" of his family's achievements, called the *Yan Family Temple Stele*. The final chapter of McNair's book tells the poignant story of Yan Zhenqing's martyrdom in the cause of loyalty to the dynasty. For his refusal to serve under a rebel leader, he was hanged at the age of seventy-six. His self-sacrifice set the seal on his life as a moral exemplar. (p. xvii)

As mentioned earlier, "correct," "severe," "serious," "forceful" are terms habitually applied to describe his writing; rarely, the author reminds us, has his calligraphy been called graceful or beautiful. How, then, did Yan earn such an eminent place in the history of art? In *The Upright Brush*, Amy McNair argues for the political rather than purely aesthetic basis for Yan Zhenqing's artistic reputation. She shows how his prominent position was made for him in the eleventh century by a handful of influential men, highly educated in philosophy, literature, and art, who sought to advance their own position by associating themselves with Yan's reputation for uprightness. Equating style with personality, they adopted Yan's calligraphic style as a way to clothe themselves in his persona. They collected and copied his works, incorporated elements of his style into their own original striking art, and celebrated his incorruptable reputation and forceful style as the finest model in their critical writing on art.

The artistic biography of Yan Zhenqing, which forms the core of this study, begins with Yan's illustrious family and his meteoric early career and ends with his crowning appointments to high national office and his martyrdom. The author focuses on several calligraphic masterpieces, ranging from the ink-written draft of the eulogy for his nephew, with its painful emotion and artless style, to the rugged grandeur of his cliff-engraved *Paeon to the Resurgence of the Great Tang Dynasty*. The content and style of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian works are explained and situated within Yan's life and contemporary events in Tang-dynasty China (618–907). Responses to Yan and his art by the literati of the Song dynasty (960–1279) are woven into this framework, revealing how calligraphy assumed moral, political, personal, and institutional values.

The Upright Brush is an erudite introduction to the political and social issues surrounding the art of decorative writing. The discussion is illuminating particularly for

the sociolinguistics of calligraphy and in particular writing's place as a tool of social prestige. Writing has currency. Writing has its own linguistic economy. Amy McNair well describes an episode (one of many) in the history of Chinese culture where the creative reinterpretation of the past was used for contemporary political means. This volume is useful not only to scholars of Chinese cultural history but in the inter-textual reading of art by sociolinguists and cultural anthropologists alike.

References

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In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project. By Christine B. N. Chin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 299p. \$52.00 cloth; \$20.50 paper.

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In a moving narrative steeped in critical interdisciplinary approach, Chin explains how state elites in Malaysia have made use of foreign female domestic workers to advance the country's niche and competitiveness in the global economy and negotiate the terms of social consent and control over the society's multi-ethnic middle classes.

Showing the multi-faceted intersections of the global and local political economy with that of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion and nationality, the book addresses systematically a little studied aspect of contemporary Malaysia's quest for economic development and modernity: the systematic use of foreign female domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia to underpin further industrial growth while ensuring middle class consent for ambitious state policies.

By the 1980s, Malaysia's rapid economic growth through its export-oriented industrialization policies facilitated by the new international division of labor had created a Malay bourgeoisie and a significant middle class. However, economic growth gave rise to a new set of problems. In mobilizing large numbers of the Malay working women, the multinational factories in the export processing zones, in the same breath, deprived the expanding middle classes of their traditional source of low wage household help. As further stressed by Chin, it became politically incorrect for the state leadership under UMNO to call for Malaysian live-in domestic workers for the middle classes since the political elites themselves had officially encouraged the