

Entexted Heritage: Calligraphy and the (Re)Making of a Tradition in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT: From medieval times to the present, calligraphy has been theorised as a product of “spirit” rather than of the hand, and has been situated atop the Chinese aesthetic hierarchy. Recognising calligraphy as a key aspect of national identification, the People’s Republic of China applied for its recognition to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Through the process of constructing calligraphy as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), a simplified calligraphic canon emerged, which epitomises the “correct spirit of tradition.” Building on art historical and anthropological questions of transmission and authentication of the classical tradition of calligraphy, this paper challenges this idealised conceptualisation by investigating how a contemporary Chinese ICH regime has worked to “entextualise” calligraphy into present social and political circumstances.

KEYWORDS: calligraphy, rubbing, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), entextualisation, spirit.

Introduction

Through the standardisation of styles, the study of past models, and the theorisation of gesture, from medieval times to present, the “classical tradition” of Chinese calligraphy (*shufa* 書法) has been perceived as situated atop the Chinese aesthetic hierarchy. Indeed, recognising calligraphy as a key aspect of national identification, the People’s Republic of China applied for its recognition to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, to which it was successfully added in 2009. However, through the process of constructing calligraphy as intangible cultural heritage (ICH), a simplified calligraphic canon emerged as an “always-already authentic tradition” of the Chinese Nation.

Historically, calligraphic works in China were preserved through successive acts of copying, generally transitioning from writing on silk or paper to stone and wood engravings. This form of reproduction led to the commissioning of massive collections of inscribed monuments by successive emperors, such as the famous Stele Forest (*beilin* 碑林) in Xi’an. The engraved calligraphic models were studied and diffused as rubbings through time and space. For this reason, it can be said that these stone tablets do not correspond to the Eurocentric definition of a monument in that their nature is textual and symbolic rather than architectural.¹ Still, because they possess a versatile form of monumentality,² they correspond to the blending of material and immaterial (or intangible) heritage explored in this paper. Throughout the article, we will engage this alternative understanding of materiality in which rubbings act as a bridge between inscribed monuments and calligraphic works.

Throughout the history of calligraphy, it was copying practices – in particular rubbing techniques – that allowed for the formation,

transmission, and diffusion of a canon in the lineage of model calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361 CE) and his recognised successors. These rubbings were produced by humidifying a sheet of paper placed on the engraved stone surface, where one then added an infusion of rhizoma bletillae root (*baiji* 白芨) or glue. The wet paper was then “moulded” into the depressions of the stone surface with the help of brushes of varying hardness so as to render the engraved detail. Once the paper is nearly dry, its surface was inked with a silk pad filled with cotton-wool or husk, blackening the relief and leaving the intaglio white.

In the past, rubbings of calligraphic models allowed for dissemination of carvings on otherwise cumbersome engraved monuments and were a critical element in the standardisation of writing and ideology in early Chinese dynasties. Even after the invention of woodblock printing, aesthetic and religious motivations maintained the role of rubbings as preferred medium for the propagation of calligraphic models (Starr 2017: 24). Indeed, historically, rubbings were highly valued by scholars both for research and aesthetic purposes and were perceived as intimately connected to calligraphy as a disciplined practice (Starr 2017: 168). Yet, despite the historical ubiquity of rubbings in calligraphic practice and their major role in preserving and transmitting social memory, present-day calligraphers and scholars in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) minimise their significance by downgrading the practice to a “craft” separate from what is now recognised as “traditional” calligraphy (Wei, Zhang, and Van Belle 2020: 88–97).

1. For a study of the successive functions of steles through early Chinese history, see Wong (2004).

2. For an attempt at grouping several kinds of symbolic artifacts under the concept of “monumentality” rather than “monuments,” see Wu (1995).

This apparent oversight raises interesting questions regarding the perception of material culture and the very notion of “tradition” and “heritage” and its management. For this reason, this article emphasises the role of rubbings in the development of a recognised calligraphic “tradition” and its transmission by borrowing from contemporary linguistic anthropological theory to propose reconsidering the heritagisation of material and traditional folk-culture generally as “entexted heritage” (Urban 1996; French 2012). This paper is then organised trans-historically by describing the rigid regimes that have come to define the “spirit” of the calligraphic tradition – a ubiquitous concept in the identification, management, and study of Chinese ICH today.

The emphasis on correct “spirit” (*jingshen* 精神) in manifestations of defined ICH items helps to construct loose, yet highly authoritative limits around what can – and often more importantly what *cannot* – be considered “authentic” expressions of traditional culture. We argue that an investigation of rubbings can prove a productive avenue in the theorisation of calligraphic heritage as a unique and highly consequential form of entextualisation. From this we ask: what can a theorisation of copying practices – in particular rubbings – in China contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the calligraphic tradition and “heritage”?

Part One of this article provides theoretical and historical context. We begin by developing the argument that calligraphic rubbings can be productively understood as a unique form of entextualisation – that is, a process by which texts are produced by removing discourse from its original context and reinserting it into new, authoritative settings. For it was rubbings that were the main instruments for the dissemination and study of model works, the key source material for the development of an almost uncontested “classical tradition” in calligraphy. Further, we highlight that early Chinese theorists would come to prioritise an essentialised calligraphic “spirit” as the highest aesthetic ideal as opposed to simple reproduction of calligraphic “form.” Part Two of this article outlines these historical precedents and their deep political implications to contemporary so-called “intangible cultural heritage with Chinese characteristics.” We show that the Chinese ICH preservation regime, though having thoroughly incorporated global heritage discourses, has fundamentally reimagined ICH as a critical element of state culture-power. To do this, state sponsored organisations and experts have needed to simplify otherwise complex processes and histories to suit contemporary ICH categorisation and ideological narratives. As we show, although the “spirit” of calligraphy is still held supreme, this “spirit” has in part come to be appropriated by political and nation-building interests. In a field where anachronism is the rule, where traditional culture should admittedly “serve the present,” surprisingly few studies have attempted to bridge the divide between ancient and modern China. A final discussion gathers a few remarks about the way the classical tradition is being entextualised by the contemporary Chinese heritage regime.

Collectively, the authors have more than 15 years of research and ethnographic experience on heritage topics in different Chinese provinces and regions, and this article draws on more than a dozen interviews with experts, scholars, calligraphers, and government officials, conducted in Chinese, and supplemented by supporting documents and published works written by interviewees and associated organisations.

Calligraphic copies and entexting the past in the present

Rubbings and the making of a “classical tradition”

As archaeologists and anthropologists have long argued, the terms “tradition,” “heritage,” and even “culture,” although intimately associated with imagined pasts, often diverge substantially from the available historical evidence (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Kuper 1999; Boyer and Lomnitz 2005; Smith 2006; Smith and Campbell 2016). The challenge for culturally sensitive researchers, however, is not to contest indigenous – or even elite – representations of practices related to the manufacture of sites for collective identification (i.e. claims to collective “culture,” “tradition,” “heritage,” etc.) (French 2012); but neither should we accept these claims uncritically.

In anthropological theory, “entextualisation” describes a process of decontextualising a text, utterance, or performance from its socially and historically unique context and re-contextualising the original event into new authoritative discourses (Urban 1996: 21). While claiming the authority of the original, the entextualised event is nevertheless subject to strategic re-articulation and “erasure” to suit the social and political environments of each unique circumstance where “it” is deployed, thereby reconnecting the present world to a distant ancestral past (Irvine and Gal 2000; Bauman and Briggs 2006). According to anthropologist Jan Blommaert, claims to “tradition” are “entextualisation par excellence” (2005: 48), and the same could certainly be argued for the highly officialised “heritage” discourses in China and beyond.

More to the point, the practice of inscribing a copy of calligraphic writing into stone, and subsequently producing rubbings therefrom for the express purpose of perpetuating a specific stylistic or ideological tradition, is a concrete, material, and even tactile example of entextualisation. The case of rubbings in China proves an illustrative heuristic for the entextualisation of traditional practices and their officialised ICH counterparts that offers room for both critical engagements with historically dubious assertions while simultaneously taking seriously these claims of heritage practitioners as objects of ethnographic investigation.

This process of “entexting” specific calligraphic texts to produce and reproduce authoritative models in disparate circumstances has a long, consequential, and decidedly political history spanning thousands of years, and can still be observed today in contemporary processes of identifying calligraphy as ICH, albeit in a highly simplified form. Indeed, in ancient China the act of copying calligraphy began with events where a source deemed authoritative was produced as a model of an officialised style and content to be reproduced and diffused throughout the imperial domain.

The earliest extant mention of copying calligraphy dates to 175 CE, during the erection of the Stone Classics by the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) rulers. These stone steles (*bei* 碑) were situated outside the Imperial Academy in Luoyang to promote a standardised version of the Confucian Classics and official clerical script for the period. Records report over a thousand chariots each day visiting the capital carrying scholars and students for the purpose of copying the texts, crowding the streets with their traffic (Fan: 1971–1990). And although the generalised use of rubbings (*tapiān* 拓片) can only be traced back to the sixth century CE, this process remained the only means of mechanically reproducing engraved inscriptions on paper for a millennium and a half (Starr 2017: 18). Stone

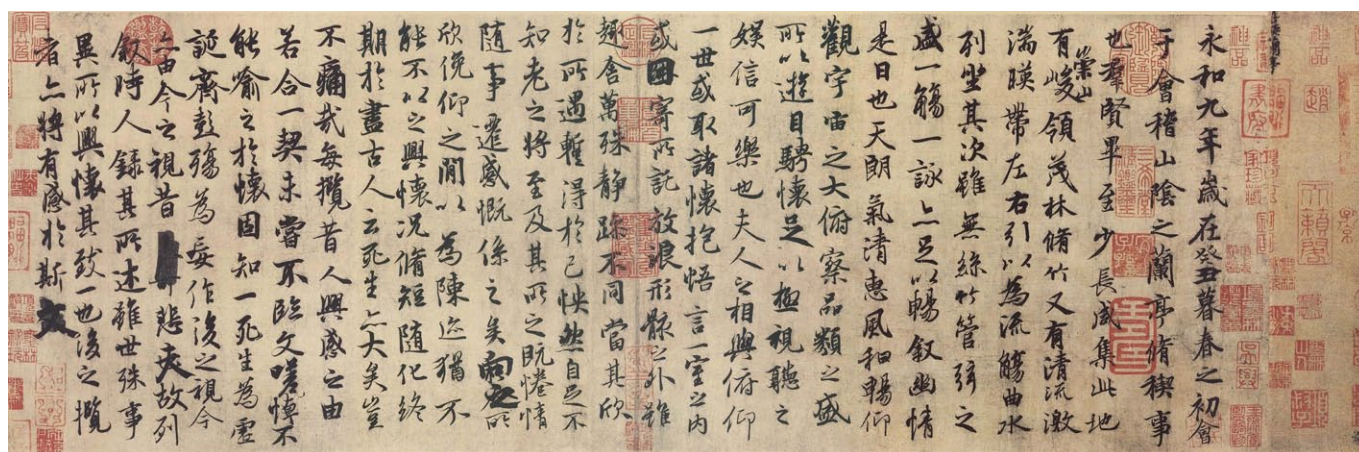


Figure 1. Above: In this Tang Dynasty (618-907) ink-written reproduction of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* by Wang Xizhi attributed to Feng Chengsu 馮承素 (617-672), the '之' character is reputed to have been written a dozen times in a different fashion. His mastery of variation on a same theme was a signature of Wang Xizhi's style. Palace Museum, Beijing. Credits: Wikimedia commons.

Figure 2. Below: The wider diffusion of the emblematic work happened through rubbings of models engraved after the handwritten early copies, such as this Song Dynasty (960-1279) rubbing. Palace Museum, Beijing. Credits: courtesy of the Palace Museum, artifact No. 46685.

steles were the focus of rubbing techniques that purportedly guaranteed the integrity of the inscribed text, whereby the purpose of cutting steles was gradually directly associated with its suitability for producing rubbed copies (*ibid.*: 19).

The means of reproduction for calligraphy thus influenced the very production of inscribed monuments and is illustrative of the circular nature of the calligraphic tradition. The distribution of calligraphic models was achieved by re-inscribing in stone handwritten calligraphy, after which rubbings were taken from the engraved monuments and subsequently compiled into albums (*fatie* 法帖), also known as "model books."

It is from this *a posteriori* form of monumentalisation that a so-called "classical tradition" emerged, modelled mainly on handwritten pieces by the so-called Two Kings (*er wang* 二王) – Wang Xizhi 王羲之 and his son Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344-386 CE) (Ledderose 1979: 10). Indeed, the now recognised "classical tradition" that developed in the following centuries served as a tool for the unification of the north and south under Tang Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626-49), who declared Wang Xizhi the greatest calligrapher of all times (Fang 1974: 2107) and subsequently confiscated or bought all the extant works to form the palace collection. Taizong required the high officials Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557-641) and Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558-638) to produce freehand copies of Wang Xizhi's "authentic" pieces, which were then distributed as instruction

materials for the sons of court nobles at the palace school. These pieces were incorporated into the imperial examinations (McNair 1995a: 263), thus becoming a precondition for membership into the administrative elite. Due to their perceived great contribution to the calligraphic canon, Ouyang Xun and Yu Shinan were themselves entered the pantheon of calligraphers, transitioning "from official copyists to calligraphy masters" (McNair 1994: 209).

In the following centuries, Wang Xizhi's style continued to function as an imperial signature, becoming "the supreme icon of the empire's continuous possession, loss, and reconstitution of culture as writing" (Kern 2015: 132). In 992, Song Emperor Taizong 太宗 commanded the selection of the finest works of calligraphy in imperial and private collections to be engraved on blocks, resulting in the compilation of an important "model book" of Chinese calligraphy known as the *Model Letters in the Imperial Archives in the Chunhua Era* (*Chunhua mige fatie* 淳化秘閣法帖). Model pieces by Wang Xizhi were incorporated into the Imperial Examination system, such as his most famous model work *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (*Lanting xu* 蘭亭序, Figure 1), thus becoming the precondition for membership into the administrative elite (McNair 1994: 210).

Continuous discussion by commentators in the following centuries revealed the haunting anxiety surrounding the authenticity of Wang Xizhi's handwriting (Kern 2015: 127) and the constructed nature of its

spontaneity, but it was nevertheless validated as “authentic” by the imperial court (*ibid.*: 132). As a result, the very foundations of the “classical tradition” of calligraphy can be said to lack “originals” and are based solely in copies of model works deemed authoritative by the powers that were. Historian Robert Harrist even suggests that the ability to copy model calligraphy, and the various techniques available to produce these copies, are what conferred such prominent status to this art form (2004: 32), concluding that in Chinese calligraphy, the copy itself is the final product (*ibid.*: 49).

Beyond its capacity to be formally copied, the canonical calligraphic artwork must be based on a given literary or historical reference, and it should be produced by the “spirit” (*shencai* 神采) rather than by the hand (Escande 1996: 232) – a term first applied to calligraphy by Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192 CE) in his calligraphic treatise (*Bifu* 筆賦). Cai Yong uses the term *shencai* when describing the meditative attitude of the calligrapher when he prepares himself to write, one of profound concentration (“plunged in the density and radiance of the spirit” *chenmi shencai* 沈密神采) (Huang 1981: 6). Theorist Wang Sengqian 王僧虔 (425–485 CE) in his treatise entitled *Ode to Meaningful Brushwork* (*Biyi zan* 筆意贊) uses the same term to emphasise the “spirit” of calligraphic writing above “form,”³ a concept that became quite influential in subsequent calligraphic treatises. Further, in his authoritative collection entitled *Writings by the Layman of Guxi* (*Guxi jushi qianji* 姑溪居士前集), Song Dynasty poet Li Zhiyi 李之儀 (1048–1117 CE) uses the term *jingshen* in the same understanding, as the highest aesthetic ideal and main source of creativity, as opposed to simple “form” of production and product.⁴ *Jingshen* literally translates as “essence and spirit,” with “essence” being used to describe a work of art and to qualify the artist’s writing gesture, and “spirit” also appearing alone to describe a superior, even divine dimension (Elbaz 2014: 210).⁵

For Wang and his successors, “spirit” was said to correspond to higher expressive forms such as calligraphy and later, by extension, literati painting. The association of artists with a “spirit” distinct from visual efficiency, and of craftsmen with mere “skill” lacking spiritual qualities, has remained anchored in Chinese artistic theories even today – a prejudice against material culture in relation to writing that remains, yet simultaneously also perpetuates the self-referential circle of the calligraphic tradition.

Another understanding of the “spirit” relates calligraphy to the expression of moral values – an aspect referred to as the “characterological” dimension of calligraphy – not just in personal terms, but as a way to publicly cultivating Confucian values through the imitation of earlier styles. For example, the calligraphy of Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709–85) was promoted by Song literati for his resistance towards the style of the two Wangs: his firm and orthogonal interpretation of Wang Xizhi’s more seductive style was construed as a demonstration of his righteousness (McNair 1998: 135). The highly regarded calligrapher Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107), basing his writing on his own private collection of Jin Dynasty (265–420) works (Kohara 1995: 11), rehabilitated the calligraphy of Wang Xianzhi, usually considered as of lesser quality than that of his father, thereby distancing himself from conventional adherence to Wang Xizhi’s style (Ledderose 1979: 54). While Yan Zhenqing was presented as a paradigm of Confucian morality (Mc Nair 1998: 127), Mi Fu’s oeuvre was seen as a daring use of calligraphy as a form of individualised expression.

As shown by the example of Yan Zhengqing, it was generally understood that as a prerequisite for a new calligraphic work to enter into

the canon, calligraphers needed to position themselves in relation to the Wang lineage, even when such positioning involved a degree of resistance, critique, or innovation. Not even an emperor felt he could challenge the canons of the classical tradition, as illustrated by the example of Song emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1082–1137), who unlike previous rulers elaborated his own distinctive calligraphic style, known as Slender Gold (*shoujinti* 瘦金體). Huizong did not take advantage of his powerful status to impose his calligraphy as a nationwide model, or even courtly style (Ebrey 2006: 261). Despite its originality, his experiment did not alter the calligraphy practiced, collected, and encouraged by emperors, what was taught at the court calligraphy academy, or styles used in official documents and by officials, even in their private literary production.

Reconsidering the “classical tradition” in modern and contemporary China

During much of China’s post-Revolution period, calligraphy was to a greater or lesser extent conceptually decoupled from its past. For where dynastic traditions tended to carry the authority of calligraphic exemplars, such as the Two Wangs and others, revolutionary calligraphy came to embody the power and authority of the revolutionary personality who wrote it, thereby carrying the authors’ influence into the objects and spaces onto which it was inscribed (Kraus 1991: 89).

Despite a short-lived reaction to the logographic *hanzi* (漢字) script known as the Latinisation Movement, the practice of Chinese calligraphy has remained remarkably resilient even in the face of the twentieth century’s multiple radically anti-traditionalist disruptions.⁶ Indeed, in much of China’s post-Revolution period, calligraphy was to a greater or lesser extent conceptually decoupled from its past. For where dynastic traditions tended to carry the authority of calligraphic exemplars, such as the Two Wangs and others, revolutionary calligraphy came to embody the power and authority of the personality who wrote it and could be said to carry their power into the objects and spaces onto which it was inscribed (*ibid.*). In fact, political calligraphy became a key element of Mao’s radical revolutionary politics, particularly through the popularisation of the so-called big-character poster (*dazibao* 大字報) (Chen 1990: 342; Yen 2004). Revolutionary calligraphers such as Mao himself nevertheless deemphasised historic models and classical canons in favour of massification and revolutionary “spirit” – a spirit that came to replace the “spiritual” quality required for calligraphy to be placed among the higher forms of expression.

3. The text states: “In the mysterious way of calligraphy, the spirit is foremost, while form and matter are secondary” (書之妙道，神采為上，形質次之，*shu zhi miao dao, shencai wei shang, xingzhi ci zhi*) (cited in Huang 1981: 62).
4. The text states: “In calligraphy, the spirit is foremost, then comes the relation between forms, and finally, composition” (凡書精神為上，結密次之，位置又次之，*fan shu jingshen wei shang, jie mi ci zhi, weizhi you ci zhi*) (cited in Zhang 2006: 40). In a different understanding, *jingshen* could be translated as “vital spirit.” Indeed, Tang Dynasty calligrapher Zhang Huaiguan 張懷瓘 (active ca. 724–760 CE) in “Views on Calligraphy” (*Shuyi* 書議) compares the same “spirit” in calligraphic practice to life inhabiting plants and animal: “If grass and trees each generate their own vital breath, without concealing it, what should one expect from animals, or even people? Angry beasts and birds of prey are each enlivened by a spirit of their own, and so is the way of calligraphy.” (夫草木各務生氣，不自埋沒，況禽獸乎？況人倫乎？猛獸鸞鳥，神彩採各異，書道法此，*Fu caomu gewu shengqi, bu zi maimo, kuang qinshou hu? Kuang renlun hu? Mengshou zhi niao, shencai ge yi, shudao fa ci*). (cited in Huang 1981: 144–45).
5. The official copyist and calligraphy master Yu Shinan, for example, in his work *Marrow of the Brush* (*Bisui* 筆髓), explains how calligraphic inspiration is depending upon the *shen* and cannot be forced: “The way of the brush is profound and mysterious; it must rely on spiritual encounter and cannot be forcefully requested” (故知書道玄妙，必資神遇不可以力求也，*guzhi shudao xuanmiao, bi zi shen yu bu keyi liqiu ye*) (cited in Huang 1981: 113).
6. See for example Lu Xun (2011: 187–89). For a more comprehensive review of the Latinisation Movement, see Wong (2013).

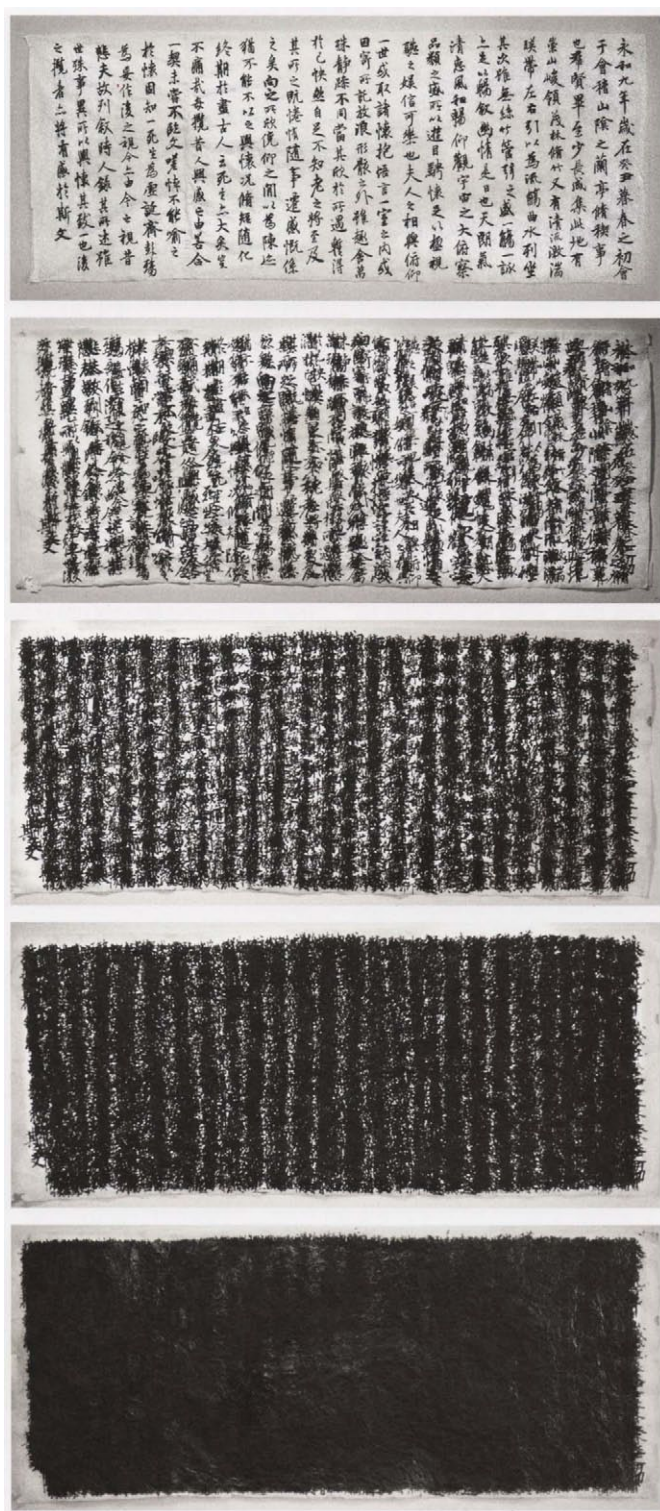


Figure 3. "Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Thousand Times" (1990–95) by Qiu Zhijie 邱志傑. Credits: courtesy of the artist.

Yet, after the death of Mao, under the reformist leadership of Deng Xiaoping, economic reorganisation fuelled a market for calligraphy that supported the gradual recuperation of the "classical tradition" as a practice (Barrass 2002: 53–62). For example, contemporary Chinese calligrapher Pu Lieping 濮列平 notes that when he began studying in the 1980s, he was strongly influenced by mid-century Japanese calligraphers, but also abstract expressionism (Pu Lieping, interview, 3 August 2020). However, the political powers opposed assimilating

modern calligraphy into abstractionism – an official disapproval that can be traced to a present-day insistence on preserving a well-defined "classical tradition" of calligraphy.⁷ Together with young calligraphers of his generation, Pu participated in several avant-garde artistic movements, such as Calligraphism (*shufazhuyi* 書法主義) and the so-called Chinese characters and ink painting (*hanzi shuimo* 漢字水墨) movements, where each modern calligrapher formulated his/her own individualised path, experimenting in the wider fields of postmodern art, performance art, installation art, etc. (Barrass 2002: 236–243). Yet, these experiments were met with strong resistance (Escande 1996: 34).

Several decades after the first post-reform era experiments in modern calligraphy, even clearer limits were still being drawn, requiring modern calligraphic artwork-as-ICH to contain characters that are readable with clear reference to Wang Xizhi (Xiang Yunju 向雲駒, ICH expert and chief editor of China's premier arts periodical *China Arts Daily*, interview, 18 August 2020). One such example can be seen in the work of the officially sanctioned contemporary calligrapher Qiu Zhijie 丘志杰 (1969 b.).

In his performance "Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Thousand Times" (1990–95) (Figure 3), Qiu Zhijie copies the same famed calligraphic model *Orchid Pavilion Preface* repeatedly over several years on the same sheet of paper, eventually blackening the paper. This act of writing can be read as a critical re-examination of the "classical tradition" by looking at history as an on-going process that demands participation (Hopfener 2015: 44). Yet, rather than feeling threatened by the critical charge of such a work, "Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Thousand Times" is considered a contemporary model work of calligraphy-as-heritage because it satisfies the rigid criteria of readability and "tradition" with direct reference to a defined canon. It remains far more acceptable than ink artworks that maintain primarily the performative aspects of calligraphy by rejecting the use of traditional brushes, ink, or paper, or by merging calligraphic expression with other forms of art such as painting, music, or dance such as those produced by Pu Lieping described above. Whereas the latter is readily accepted as calligraphy-as-heritage, the former was said to have lost its Chinese specificity and is purported to "dilute" calligraphy into the wider practice of ink art – a loss often compared to Chinese painting (*Guohua* 國畫, lit. National Painting), until recently deemed too Westernised to be listed as Chinese ICH.⁸ However, historical evidence suggests that often extreme variation in calligraphic models was present and accepted throughout the historical development of the practice.

If we turn to early modern history, calligraphy since the eighteenth century has been in part defined by a fairly strong reaction to the above-delineated "classical tradition," a questioning of the authenticity of its sources, a widening of its scope, and an appropriation of its means of transmission and diffusion – rubbings, among others. For instance, the early-Qing period saw the emergence of new branches of Metal and Stone Studies (*jinchixue* 金石學), a form of antiquarianism that flourished

7. Both political motivation and cultural anxiety lie behind this rejection of abstraction in the field of traditional Chinese art. After WWII, Abstract Expressionism carried political meaning associated with formalism, self-expression, cultural critique, apoliticism, etc., often opposed to socialist realism. See Klose-Ullmann and Holler (2016) regarding the political connotations of Abstract Expressionism in China.

8. On the modernisation and Westernisation of Chinese painting in Communist China and the quest for a politically correct artistic practice (Andrews 1990). Successive denominations and an impoverished terminology are applied to painting, in the attempt of balancing a cumbersome "tradition" with the needs of a new nation (Andrews 1990: 556–9). For other forms of post-reform artistic expression, see McDougall (1984), Holm (1991), and Tuohy (1991, 1999).

in premodern China, known as Evidential Research Studies (*kaozheng xue* 考證學) and the Epigraphic School Movement (*beixue pai* 碑學派). Field-trips were organised to locate and record inscribed monuments to produce “new” rubbings of “ancient” epigraphy, which allowed for a renewal of model repertoires directly from the source. Unlike the model books described above, which were re-engraved time and time again, and the ink-written works of the classical tradition that had been handed down through generations of reproduction, anonymous epigraphic inscriptions had survived intact, ignored by history, and were thereby considered “more authentic” (McNair 1995b: 114).

Rubbings allowed for the writing of alternative histories of calligraphy by providing evidence of alternative styles, unexplored steles, and forgotten monuments predating the standardisation of calligraphic styles under the Tang, thus outside of the strictly defined “classical tradition” (McNair 2012). Going beyond classical calligraphic practice, the heightened interest in material culture and its context tempered the classical discrimination between art and craft, thereby expanding the canon, for instance, in the case of scholars such as Ma Fuyan 馬傳岩 (1796–1820), who expanded rubbing techniques by shifting the paper to rub different parts of objects on a single sheet, a procedure known as “full form rubbing” (*quanxing ta* 全形拓) (Starr 2017: 128). Rather than simply expanding the appreciation of antiques, however, these practices afforded a higher status to ancient material culture, which until then was enjoyed only by brush-produced art (Harrist 1995: 272).

Omitting evidence of this far more flexible historical relationship with the calligraphic canon in the contemporary Chinese ICH regime demonstrates a clear act of “erasure” and a highly selective relationship with historical evidence that, in the words of anthropologists Irvine and Gal, “[renders] some social phenomena invisible in ways that simplify a social field.” (2000: 37).

Activities such as those described above forcefully assimilated cultural artifacts into authorised narratives and are consequential in the construction of an “authorised” heritage product such as calligraphy-as-ICH. And though all signatories to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage have developed individual institutions and norms surrounding the preservation of ICH, the unique politics, policies, and complicated bureaucracy of the PRC have fashioned a characteristically Chinese form of ICH preservation that has influenced the definition of ICH in China, including calligraphy.

It is to this unique institutional and ideological development that we now turn.

“Intangible cultural heritage protection with Chinese characteristics”

Authorising the “traditional” in China

Undeniably, the post-war popularisation of “heritage” as an aspect of cultural governance has fundamentally transformed perceptions of “tradition” and “cultural practice” globally – and China is no exception. Indeed, recent studies have worked to deemphasise “heritage” as the material product of historical processes, emphasising rather “a concern with heritage as discourse and system of values” (Harrison 2013: 115) and arguing that heritage itself is a powerful ideological product with profound political implications (Walsh 1992: 135–40; Herzfeld 2004, 2005; Smith 2006; Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2012).

With the emergence of organisations and institutions for the

advancement of national and international heritage policy and politics, what Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann (2012) have helpfully termed “global heritage regimes,” and “traditional culture”; its practice has paradoxically been complicated but also simplified: complicated due to a now institutionalised need to define, categorise, and manage designated aspects of cultural heritage, but also “simplified” so as to render these products “legible” (Scott 1998) for that very purpose (Reddy 2006; Coombe 2012).

For instance, Smith (2006) argues that global heritage discourses have been shaped by a Western “authorised heritage discourse” that establishes a predominately Euro-centric understanding of heritage that is in turn charged with *a priori* definitions of the meaning and value of “heritage” and its preservation. Therefore, Smith maintains that “heritage” as a concept should be recognised as a “set of practices and performances” that reinforce and reify a dominant socio-political worldview (Smith 2006: 11; Smith and Campbell 2016: 443). In the case of China’s exaggeratedly state-centric “heritage regime” and quiet renegotiation of Western concepts of “preservation,” it can be argued that China itself has effectively begun developing its own “authorised heritage discourse” and its associated “performances” (Lu 2017: 131).

This Chinese authorised heritage discourse and ICH ideology, however, differs significantly from other global ICH preservation regimes. Indeed, contemporary international organisations such as those promoted by UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage claim that “intangible heritage” preservation should ideally begin at the community level, with local practitioners themselves recognising and seeking support for preserving cultural heritage perceived “valuable” and endangered (Deacon *et al.* 2004); yet in China the process is quite the opposite. Chinese ICH protection is designed to begin with Party and central government institutions and then filter down to regional and local governments, and finally to the common people (Beckett and Gerard 2012). The central government formulates policies requiring lower-level governments to identify local cultural heritage to be valued and protected and then apply for its recognition through a complicated listing process (Yan 2016). In fact, it is not possible for an individual or non-state organisation to prepare applications for ICH listings at any level, as all applications must be submitted by and through relevant government offices.

Moreover, the PRC’s call in its 2005 “Opinion of the General Office of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of China’s Intangible Cultural Heritage”⁹ for a so-called “intangible cultural heritage protection with Chinese characteristics” seems to directly contradict the 2003 UNESCO Convention’s effort to decentre the state and state-sanctioned experts from heritage preservation work by stating that Chinese ICH will be “led by the government and participated in by the people” (*zhengfu zhudao, shehui canyu* 政府主導，社會參與) while forcefully underscoring the role of state-sanctioned experts in ICH identification, protection, promotion, and transmission (cited in Maags and Holbig 2016).¹⁰ This

9. Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China 中華人民共和國中央人民政府 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhongyang renmin zhengfu*. 2005. 國務院辦公廳關於加強我國非物質文化遺產保護工作的意見 (*Guowuyuan bangongting guanyu jiaqiang woguo fei wuzhi wenhua yichan baohu gongzuo de yijian*, Opinion of the General Office of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of China’s Intangible Cultural Heritage). http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2005/content_63227.htm (accessed on 3 May 2021).

10. For a comprehensive overview of the official role of the state in Chinese ICH preservation, see Ma and Zhu (2018).

apparent incongruity has not deterred China from becoming the world's most active participant in UNESCO's ICH listing regime, compiling nearly as many listings as the next two countries combined.¹¹

Yet, when looking at the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage, calligraphy stands out as an apparent outlier among other Chinese cultural "folk" artefacts. Indeed, in an interview with an expert directly associated with calligraphy's ICH listing in China, it was claimed that from the beginning calligraphy was perceived as "special," and for that reason it effectively circumvented many of the bureaucratic complications other "folk-culture" program applications were purported to have experienced. For example, most ethnic minority ICH required county or regional sponsorship before being passed to the provincial level for endorsement and then finally submitted for approval to national bodies for recognition as ICH. However, calligraphy required no such procedure, for it was claimed that calligraphy was considered *a priori* "national" heritage without territorial boundaries (Xiang Yunju, interview, 18 August 2020).

Furthermore, though most ICH programs have been generally recognised as "folk-arts" or "folk-practices," calligraphy has always been perceived as an expressive art form accessible only to the elite; and despite official claims to the contrary, calligraphy's widespread practice ostensibly did not necessitate a national preservation regime to ensure its continuity – yet it was nevertheless unproblematically added to the national-level ICH listing in 2008. Still, by delineating a category of calligraphy-as-heritage from other cultural manifestations, calligraphy-as-practice has been severely constrained so as to suit a limited definition of "traditional" practices. This narrow definition of "traditional" calligraphy, we argue, includes the conscious separation of calligraphy as art versus rubbing as craft.¹²

As the above has shown, Chinese culture-as-ICH is an institution representing a highly politicised process of constructing authoritative categories and definitions for designated cultural artefacts and folk-practices through state-centric authorising procedures designed to draw in government actors, experts, and even ICH practitioners themselves. The following section explores aspects of this authoritative processes by which specific categories of culture are rendered "correct," and how manifestations of "traditional culture" are required to express correct "spirit" to be determined sanctionable ICH.

"Correctness" and "spirit" in Chinese ICH

When discussing ICH among Chinese academics, one ubiquitous and virtually uncontested view is that "Chinese ICH" is the product of China's unique "national circumstance," or *guoqing* (國情) (Wu 2010: 17; Song and Ni 2019). *Guoqing* is presented as a holistic, objective measure of a nation's unique history, society, culture, and politics and has no direct corollary in Anglophone literature. Nevertheless, though *guoqing* is understood as the universal and "objective" properties of a country and its people, the term also includes politically charged claims to the "correctness" of its interpretation (Mao 1959: 17). That is to say, in China it is often stated that in order to understand contemporary China and Chinese culture, one must "correctly" understand China's *guoqing* (Qiu 2018) – so much so that "guoqing education" is a central component of students' required "ideological education." *Guoqing* as a concept works to naturalise a specific ideological worldview in China by depoliticising an otherwise highly politicised subject through the illusion of objectivity. With relation to Chinese ICH, Chinese *guoqing* becomes useful shorthand when confronting critics and explaining away China's state-centred and

highly technocratic ICH regime.

The implications of this for Chinese ICH preservation and promotion are profound. Indeed, in his authoritative textbook on ICH work in China, the former Deputy Minister of Culture Wang Wenzhang 王文章 claimed that China has three thousand years of unbroken cultural preservation experience, beginning with the Western Zhou Dynasty (1045–771 BCE), that was "always-already" ICH protection (Wang 2013: 143). He then described the evolution of "modern" Chinese ICH protection from the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) to the early 20th century Republicans and finally the work of the Communists and present-day PRC as evidence of the historical exceptionalism of China's ICH system (*ibid.*: 147–56). Notwithstanding the dubiousness of this claim, great effort is given to gleaning historical documents for evidence to support these narratives. And though neither the official claims nor the private ones of many ICH officials or academics would deny the plurality of cultural forms associated with ICH, such as calligraphy, officialised discourses surrounding ICH set strict limits around what can be deemed "heritage" versus what are merely "artistic" or "expressive" variations of "traditional" practices. For example, Wang notes, "it is very important for us to correctly understand ICH scientifically" (2008: 8), and he forcefully underscores the importance of "correctly" recognising ICH's value and "correctly" preserving it (*ibid.*: 10). Likewise, famed folklorist and former president of the Chinese Folklore Society, Wu Bing'an 烏丙安, claims in his influential work on ICH theory and practice that "scientific" and therefore "correct" ICH preservation practices "must be closely integrated with Chinese *guoqing*" (2010: 17).

This emphasis on "correctness" in calligraphy as ICH was evident in a series of interviews with various experts and ICH officials conducted between November 2019 and September 2020. For example, Xiang Yunju argues that calligraphy can be understood in two forms: "calligraphy-as-art" and "calligraphy-as-culture." For Xiang, although he respects and encourages the pursuit of "calligraphy-as-art," he understands this "art" form to be an individuated and self-expressive shadow of the far more complex and "authentic" calligraphy-as-culture, which he claims to be the acceptance of calligraphy's authoritative history and well-defined practice (Xiang Yunju, interview, 18 August 2020). To be sure, elsewhere Xiang expresses his anxiety that non-Chinese unfamiliar with these defined histories will struggle with the "true understanding of Chinese calligraphy [as heritage]" (2013: 8). Furthermore, though Xiang readily admits that rubbing techniques are critical to the transmission of the calligraphic canon, much like most interviewed experts, he asserts that this authoritative interpretation of calligraphy as ICH is distinct from it. Yet, not all interviewees were as diplomatic.

For instance, in an interview, the current director of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Centre and vice-president of the Chinese Academy of Arts, Wang Fuzhou 王福州, described the authors' interest in rubbings, transmission, and perceptions of authenticity as "simple" and "superficial." Instead, he argued that what is most important is to properly understand calligraphy's cultural "spirit" (*jingshen*). This understanding of "spirit" could be considered not unlike the classical one

11. UNESCO. *Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices*. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists> (accessed on 26 August 2020).

12. "衡水法帖雕版拓印技藝" (*Hengshui fatie diaoban tayin jiyi*, Engraving and Rubbing of Model Calligraphy in Hengshui), 2021, China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network – China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum (中國非物質文化遺產網 – 中國非物質文化遺產數字博物館), <http://www.ihchina.cn/Article/Index/detail?id=14722> (accessed on 23 August 2021).

put forward by Wang Sengqian and his followers more than a millennium prior, which assumes a predefined essence to calligraphic practice. Yet where Wang Sengqian's "spirit" of calligraphy once stood above form, today's politicised orthodoxy tends to understand "spirit" as form.

For Wang Fuzhou, this notion of "spirit" is saturated with a far more ridged definition and nationalistic interpretation that emphasises not only "scientific" correctness in a vaguely defined ideological "spirit," but also its material form. As Wang claims: "Calligraphy at a spiritual level is very exact... [and so] 'calligraphy culture,' for which you must research earnestly, is a part of its spiritual existence." For Wang, this "spiritual existence" is the "core of Chinese culture" that forms China's "national spirit" (Wang Fuzhou, interview, 7 August 2020).

In Chinese ICH work, this term "spirit" is utilised often and in numerous ways. Examples include behaving in the "spirit of" something – such as engaging ICH in the "spirit of preservation work" – or as a collective "consciousness" – such as "the Chinese spirit." However, in an officialised sense, "spirit" is also intimately connected to the guiding ideology of state culture work known as the Two Civilisations (*liangge wenming* 兩個文明) theory (Wang and Niu 1988; Dynon 2014).

Popularised by Deng Xiaoping and later developed by each subsequent government, the Two Civilisations theory posits that human civilisation is the product of two interrelated civilisational processes, Material Civilisation (*wuzhi wenming* 物質文明) – describing the material traces of human creativity – and Spiritual Civilisation (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明) – the accumulated social and embodied knowledge of humanity (Hu 1982). And although Material Civilisation is understood to be distinct from Spiritual Civilisation, it is in the constant intercourse between the two civilisations that historical civilisational evolution is possible, and "culture" is its ultimate by-product.

In this reckoning, "civilisation" is universal and absolute and the result of mankind's domination over nature, constituting the aggregation of humanity's progressive development within a framework of "irreversible" unilinear continuity (Lin and Hao 1986: 10–1; Yang 1988; Lin 2012). However, while "civilisation" represents all that is positive and progressive of a people, "culture" does not necessarily do so. Instead, it is understood that official culture work must necessarily excise the negative, reactionary, and "feudal" to catalyse the civilisational development of socialist China through a nationwide policy of cultural cultivation known as Spiritual Civilisation Construction (*jingshen wenming jianshe* 精神文明建設) – a policy intimately linked with Chinese ICH preservation.¹³

And although it would be unfair to characterise experts' and officials' emphasis on correctly understanding the "spirit" of calligraphy-as-heritage as necessarily only associated with this ideology, utilisation in official contexts nevertheless suggests an implicit acceptance of it. Therefore, this emphasis on *guoqing* and "spirit" in defining "cultural heritage" as opposed to other cultural manifestations in China is closely related to well-defined technocratic management of historical narratives and acceptable boundaries of cultural production that defines the Chinese ICH regime. Indeed, in his recent book *The Cultural Morphology of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Wang innovates on official policy by declaring that in ICH "the government leads, society participates, and experts guide" (*zhengfu zhudao, shehui canyu, zhuanjia zhidao* 政府主導, 社會參與, 專家指導) (2019: 1, I emphasise).

None of this is to say that Chinese ICH regimes are purely political, nor is it to imply that Chinese ICH work is not legitimately focused on preservation and transmission work. It is quite the opposite. In fact,

we argue that this myopic view would ignore more than a decade of very tangible results in ICH preservation work while overlooking other important historical factors that have come to influence Chinese ICH work today. Rather, what this is to say is that to be recognised as "heritage" products, works are necessarily decontextualised and recontextualised within a narrow, politicised definition of tradition and history that is designed to suit a specific contemporary national narrative and to meet set goals.

Discussion

The historical development, theorisation, and contemporary entextualisation of calligraphic and epigraphic inscriptions investigated above can be extended to other domains of literati activity, and help us understand the attitude to other manifestations of heritage in China today. Beyond steles – the classical inscribed monument *par excellence* – other kinds of inscribed objects have been the focus of antiquarian studies about the past. Behaving as vehicles of entexted authority, inscriptions inspire trust, and artifacts are inscribed for that very reason (Schafer 2011). Writing or calligraphy can therefore very well be seen as a technology of authentication. Despite compiling catalogues of antiquities including illustrations of artifacts, or atlases of stone inscriptions arranged in geographical order, the literati's interest in material culture and its context remained subordinate to the emphasis placed on inscriptions, which were subsequently recorded through rubbings. One could say that the efforts in constructing the "classical tradition" of calligraphy, the resulting scale of value, and the means for its transmission (i.e. rubbing techniques) were carried forward by antiquarians and conditioned the way Chinese scholars interpreted the past and determined the value of ancient material culture. While studying the past, the focus thus remained on inscribed objects – a legacy bias that can be felt in modern Chinese archaeological practice (Von Falkenhausen 1993), and, by extension, the understanding of cultural heritage in modern China. The comparative study of antiquarian practices in the East and West have been a topic of discussion in the last decade (Wu 2010; Miller and Louis 2012; Von Falkenhausen 2015), with specialists from both sides pointing to important convergences. Entextualisation techniques of copying are yet another case where junctions can be found and may contribute to our understanding of contemporary heritage regimes.

Important differences in current heritage regimes can be attributed to the influence of core cultural domains and their modes of transmission. As argued by Smith when challenging the Eurocentric perspective of heritage today, in the West "both architecture and archaeology, due to their ability to claim professional expertise over material culture, took on a pastoral role in identifying the appropriate monuments to be protected" (Smith 2006: 19). Among the valuable characteristics of ancient material culture as defined by the disciplines of architecture and archaeology, Smith lists: "gravitas" (the roman value of dignity or virtue); innate significance tied to age; monumentality and grand scale; aesthetic expert judgement; social consensus and nation-building. If the Eurocentric understanding of heritage is biased towards architectural monument, where does heritage

13. Article 1 of the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage" (中華人民共和國非物質文化遺產法 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan fa*), 2011, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/huiyi/lftz/fwzwhycbhf/2011-05/10/content_1729844.htm (accessed on 17 August 2021).

"with Chinese characteristics" focus its emphasis? This paper proposes that the dominant position of the arts of the brush in traditional China challenges the Western bias that connects the study of the past with ancient material culture in the PRC.¹⁴

Rubbings, as "surrogate ruins" (Wu 2015: 51), both enabled and mediated access to inscribed monuments of the past. While the very act of preserving a stele through ink rubbings endangers the integrity of the model, the written document, reproduceable and transmittable, is perceived as more durable than the physical monument (Hui 2015: 31). Segalen, following the steps of Chavannes in the early twentieth century, was among the first Western sinologists to study ancient Chinese monumental sculpture. At the time, he noticed that bronze and jade (the corresponding terms for Metal and Stone Studies briefly discussed above) were venerated for their capacity to preserve characters, and extended their influence on nature and its phenomena. In architecture, the ground plan, diagram, or the classificatory orders of style are preferred to the building itself; likewise, rubbings are preferred to the stone slab from which they were taken (Segalen 1935). Somehow, the continued use of rubbings accompanied the traditional neglect or indifference towards material heritage, which sinologist Ryckmans related to the cultivation of moral and spiritual values of the Chinese past embodied in the written word (1989).

Beyond the Eurocentric perspective, the visual education required by and transmitted by the calligraphic tradition and their corollary, rubbing techniques, brings along its own valuable angle on ancient material culture, the contribution of which to global heritage discourses is still awaited. While placing calligraphy and architecture among "intangible" heritage items expresses something of the "spiritual" quality conferred to these cultural domains, it also affirms something of their easily overlooked, sensitive, and even political dimension.

Concluding remarks: Authority and calligraphy as ICH

As anthropologist Barth famously remarked, "culture" as a boundary-producing mechanism is not only defined by what it "is," but often more importantly by what it is not (1998: 9-10). In much the same way, we have argued that the construction of "tradition" and "heritage" is ultimately the product of highly politicised linguistic processes of authorisation and categorisation that determine the relations between what is and is not "traditional" or sanctionable heritage.

In the case of the PRC, Chinese authorised heritage discourse and its emphasis on "correctness" and an otherwise vague, yet definitively ideologically rooted notion of "spirit" work to produce authoritative definitions of heritage, and therefore "authentic" ICH. Yet, this contemporary process of categorisation is not without its historical precedent. For as we have shown, the process of mass (re)production and (re)distribution of model calligraphy and canonical works and their subsequent authorisation by elite, often imperial authority in Dynastic China constructed a fairly stable "classical tradition" of calligraphic practice that persisted for thousands of years. This was only possible by the entextualisation of model works through the production of rubbings, which allowed for a wider access to models with stable formal characteristics.

Yet rubbings, despite their essential role as a vector for the establishment of the "classical tradition" and as a guarantee for the authenticity of

its models, are excluded from the contemporary selection of cultural domains reflecting a "correct spirit." Downplaying the roles of rubbings also silences the critical developments brought by the technique since the eighteenth century, when the transmission of calligraphic models was scrutinised and the divide between literati art and crafts reconsidered. Indeed, the definition of the intangible heritage with Chinese characteristics prefers a simplified and authoritative version of the history of calligraphy in line with the "classical tradition." The impulse of extending the status enjoyed by calligraphy to other areas of material culture inspired by antiquarian practices in silenced periods, however, is an aspect of ICH with Chinese characteristics that must be recognised and reckoned with in the study of heritage regimes in the PRC.

Through the example of calligraphic rubbings, we have proposed that rather than viewing "authority" in ICH definition and management as static or fixed institutionally, analysts should consider authority to be a complicated and highly political process of authorisation, done in part through practices of entextualisation and its maintenance. Viewed in this way, the *loci* of authority in producing calligraphy-as-ICH become reconceptualised as a series of observable practices in which actors utilise depersonalised authoritative political discourses to confirm, deny, and mediate social relations (Kuipers 2013: 404). We offer that the entextualisation of calligraphy-as-ICH can serve as a possible example for other cultural domains.

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14. Numerous studies have pointed to the centrality of writing and calligraphy and their relation to authority or power in both early and modern China (Kraus 1991; Connery 1998; Lewis 1999), and some have attempted to define a concept of monument "with Chinese characteristics" (Wu 1995).

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