Return

A Journey to the Past with “Oracle Bone Script Paintings” and “Characters Paintings”

by

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I. Introduction

I got the chance to study Chinese calligraphy with a Chinese calligrapher, Mr. Lu Weizhong, approximately ten years ago. During my ten-year study of Chinese calligraphy, I gradually gained knowledge and developed my own understandings of it. Yet I never expected that I would one day be able to paint in water and ink—a very different skill from calligraphy—until I met Mr. Shinohara Keiji at Wesleyan University.

I took Mr. Shinohara’s Japanese sumi-e painting class and fortunately, later became his teaching assistant. “Sumi-e” (墨絵 in Japanese) literally means “ink-wash painting” in Japanese, which shares the same root of Chinese ink wash painting (水墨画 in Chinese).

While studying and working with Mr. Shinohara, along with my knowledge of Chinese calligraphy in its historical, theoretical and technical aspects, numerous ideas of innovative Chinese art, of integrating Chinese “square characters” into ink painting, emerged when I was practicing. I tried to “write” paintings by accumulating characters (poetry) on Chinese xuan paper; I also wanted to restore the oracle bone script, the first recognizable writing system in Chinese history, to its original state—images that were directly imitated from natural objects. To me, Chinese characters in any script are art, and thus I can directly take advantage of their pictographic feature when I produce my art.

Although the original symbols or pictograms were born as practical tools, they keep the pictographic appearance of photogram philologically, which is very unique compared to other writing systems.

Unintentionally I became able to paint in ink. Traditional painting made me more connected with the past and closer to those literati ancestors who built the real Huaxia.

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1 Huaxia is “华夏” in Chinese, which means China.
culture for us. Through the study of traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, I came to understand the ancient masters’ ideas, feelings, and their aesthetic realm. I thank Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, the two great cultural heritages, for enabling me to seek my cultural origins by deeply rooting me with Huaxia’s past. Since I was longing to produce my own ink artwork by integrating calligraphy into paintings in a new way, I hope my artwork, which blurs the distinctions between traditional and modern innovative painting, can link the past and the present. The mystic sense of the bridge between the past and the present is a spiritual motivation for me to dedicate myself to preserving valuable cultural heritages, and even more essential, to look at where I am from culturally. I decided to seize the best opportunity ever--conducting an exhibition of my own as a senior thesis to show my complicated emotions to the world. I believe this exhibition will be the most meaningful one in my lifetime up to now.

During the summer of 2012, I was studying in Tokyo, Japan. I visited museums in Ueno from time to time, which proved to be the best thing I have ever done in Japan. Fortunately enough, I ran into an exhibition, Vision and Calligraphy of Aoyama San’u, which was held to perpetuate the memory of Mr. Aoyama San’u on his 100th anniversary of birth, at Tokyo National Museum. The exhibition extremely impressed me and made my belief in doing creative “calligraphy paintings” firmer, because Mr. Aoyama also worked on writing picture-like characters in a very artistic way: he transformed early age scripts such as oracle bone script and seal script back into a “primitive” and picture-like visual style. According to the evolution of Chinese characters, oracle bone script, and especially seal script are already systematic and regulated styles compared to the primitive images that were used to record. Chinese writing system evolved for easier and
more efficient writing, so mainly the curves became straight lines and the round corners transformed into square corners. Oracle bone inscription evolved from the earlier symbols and pictograms of the Neolithic Period and became the ancestor of later evolved scripts of Chinese characters. Although it still looks vivid and close to natural objects, it is systematic and less complicated than the real drawings. Mr. Aoyama’s artwork seemed to send regulated characters back to their original appearance—natural, primitive, vivid and straightforward. The sense his work radiated is kind of similar to my “returning to the origin” ideas. I felt so encouraged to see the work of a respectable calligraphy master have sort of common ground with mine and I became more confident towards what I would like to do.

After I came back from Japan to Wesleyan University, I immediately put my painting ideas into action. I did both “Oracle Bone Script Paintings” in which oracle bone scripts were processed into a more visual and primitive style based on my imagination, and “Characters Paintings” in which I repeated writing characters in order to constitute landscapes along with some traditional painting techniques. A special point is worth mentioning: each “Characters Painting” includes one Chinese poem that is chosen to support the sense and spirit each painting is designed to reflect. In other words, I designed each “Character Painting” to embody Chinese calligraphy, landscape painting and poetry, the three important objects of Chinese traditional culture, which fascinate for me.

In this statement, I would like to mainly talk about the aesthetic value of oracle bone script, the relationship between poetry, calligraphy and painting in traditional China, as well as techniques I have used when necessary. Since I think once an artwork is
finished, it belongs to the whole world, that anyone can have an interpretation and emotion towards it, I invited a viewer to write a reflection for me after he looked at my artwork. I have appended his reflection at the end.
II. Tracing Back—The Aesthetics of Oracle Bone Script

I have a particular fascination towards oracle bone script because oracle bone script brings me sense of mystique and the spiritual enlightenment; its aesthetic value also lies in the beauty of imagery that artists and poets have been pursuing for thousands of years in China. Oracle bone inscription was not produced for appreciation, but over time its aesthetic value has become more obvious. Time, a veil that makes everything mysterious, implies an aesthetic value.

Before talking about the aesthetic value of oracle bone inscription, we must look at oracle bone inscriptions’ function in Shang Dynasty. In an early age, divination or rituals for communicating with the formless was always necessary because the natural conditions were adverse and people’s producing ability was limited. People, especially the rulers of a place, had to find a spiritual sustenance that could provide them predictions and also meet their requests, such as the request for rain at a specific time. The oracle bone inscription in Shang Dynasty was just the tool produced in the purpose of divination and rituals. Shang necromancers usually carved oracle bone characters on tortoise shells and animal bones. After oracle bones were burned, the cracks appeared. Shang royals and necromancers read the cracks to get the predictions. Although no one knows exactly how Shang people read the cracks, the involvement of oracle bones proves that a “cultural-psychological formation”\(^2\) takes place in Shang.

Oracle bone inscription obviously was not produced for appreciation but for communication with the formless in order to predict the future. In fact, in early ages, religion and politics were related. Things like the weather and the harvest directly

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\(^2\) Li, Zehou. The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition. Translated by Samei, B. Maija. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press. 2010, pp. 4
determined whether people could live a good life or not. The commoners had no chance to have contact with the inscriptions used by royals, to say nothing of studying or using it in their daily life. Even the royals in Shang court prostrated themselves in worship before oracle bones. The function of oracle bone inscription was so limited that it seemed to be more utilitarian than artistic. Therefore, in the Shang court, oracle bone inscription with the sense of divinity was more likely pedestalled as an intermediate to communicate with heaven instead of an artistic piece to be appreciated.

However, in contemporary times, oracle bone inscriptions have become a kind of art. Li Zehou mentioned the difference of the function of “art object” in past and present in his book The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition that today the vivid paintings in caves appear “beautiful” to us. However, those earliest “art objects” painted deep in the dark “were not produced for the purpose of appreciation or enjoyment, as they could only be seen by the light of a torch or fires around which mystical shamanistic rituals and totemic activities were performed.” Although Shang is far from the Paleolithic period, the routine of using and manufacturing “tools” for rituals remained. Oracle bone inscription was the Shang tool for rituals, but it has become an expression of “beauty” to us. The aforementioned “time,” a perfect veil that makes everything mysterious, implies an aesthetic value.

Knowing the philological and historical value of the script does not stop people from wondering the circumstances under which these systematic writing symbols were created. At the very least observing these ancient inscriptions arouses modern people’s curiosity in the culture and civilization behind them. The passage of time gives oracle bone inscriptions a mystique because of the Chinese tradition of honoring history.

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History always provides Chinese people with lessons that may be helpful. During thousands of years, Chinese rulers set up a place just for recording and analyzing history, from which the rulers may find something useful for his governance. Due to Chinese people’s ideology of history, it is hard for any Chinese nowadays not to be sunken into the imagination of the primitive society—the mysterious rituals that uses tortoise shells and inscriptions and the cosmological sense these inscriptions make. The imagination of the far past bridges the chasm between today’s people and people of the past, and brings them to the realm of spirits and gods.

Through oracle bone inscriptions, modern people can also imagine how people were living at that time. For example, the noble women in Shang already had a subordinate status to men, seen in the oracle bone inscription. The inscription “女” is the oracle bone style of character “女” which means woman. It shows a kneeling figure whose arms are crossed in front of its body. Kneeling in Chinese tradition means subordination and crossed arms also show the feature of gentleness. In addition to woman’s status, the reason the character of woman was designed as “女” also has to do with ancient clothing and culture. The clothing culture of Huaxia People was to put a piece of cloth in front of body and later this evolved into putting two pieces of cloth in front and back of the body. In the Shang Dynasty, this clothing style already evolved from two pieces of cloths to a whole piece of skirt. Therefore, in order to hide the lower

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body, women have to sit on their knees. The imagination of mysterious rituals and living cultures in Shang based on historical facts always astonishes modern Chinese people.

The imagination then could easily internalize in oneself as a spiritual enlightenment that strips oneself away from his consciousness of and the concept of time. One sees the linkage between characters in the mandarin writing system and the characters of oracle bone inscriptions, and consequently stands beyond time. The cosmological mystique around oracle inscriptions also associates everything a contemporary Chinese knows about the universe from previous ancestors such as imagery and symbolism, Yin-Yang Theory and so forth, and thus brings oneself to the awareness of a trajectory of history and the realization of his own position in the time axis. This could mean anything to each different individual in contemporary China, but what they see and transcend inward is no doubt all very enlightening. The aesthetic value discussed above shares a striking similarity with the German romanticism term innerlichkeit or innigkeit that coins nineteen-century romantic music or literature’s ability to invoke an inward spiritual enlightenment in people.

In addition to the sense of mystique oracle bone inscription reveals, the aesthetic value of oracle bone inscriptions is also showed in the beauty of imagery. Imagery or metaphor is a Chinese way of thinking that applies to all the art forms such as music, calligraphy, paintings and literatures in China. Imagery in Chinese is “意象,” in which literally “意” means connotations or meanings while “象” means objects or pictograph. “意” is something only can be sensed, but cannot be explained in words. Here is an

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5 唐汉。汉字密码。陕西：陕西师范大学出版社。2008. pp. 435
example to illustrate “意象.” The second part of a poem by Feng Yansi of the Five Dynasties period:

“On the bank the grasses green, the willows by the river,
Ask me why these worries come again, year by year by year?
Along I stand on a small bridge, the wind filling my sleeves,
When all have gone, there is the still wood, the new moon.” ⑦

Feng Yansi demonstrates a deep emotion in this poem. He employed images such as willows and the moon to arouse his anxiety and suffering. Li Zehou has explained why art and literature need to employ metaphor and imagery. He said that is because the emotions need objectifying. ⑧ Actually my understanding is that Li Zehou’s explanation can either be that emotions need objectifying or be that objects need humanizing, at least objects can serve as the medium for the expression of everyday emotions. Li Zehou also explained that the images were usually related to clan traditions such as ancestor’s worship, but with the passage of history, the primitive images gradually lost their ideological content and become abstract form. ⑨ This kind of deep but implicit emotion showed through images therefore, is an important aesthetic criterion of the Chinese artistic tradition, which also deeply influences the aesthetic criterion of Chinese characters.

When Shang people created the oracle bone style of characters, most of the time they did not simply copy the natural objects; instead, they mixed the objects with their subjective emotions, thoughts and expectations, especially for those intangible objects

⑧ Ibid., pp. 142
⑨ Ibid., pp. 143
such as dream and name. “

is the oracle bone style of “dream,” in which a person is lying on a bed with his eyes open. The open eyes imply that he can see what happened in his dream.  

is the oracle bone style of “name.” At left side there sets a “mouth” and at the right side there sets “evening.” This character means that when two people encounter in the dark, both of them do not know who the other is. Hence, they have to tell the other their own names.  Both of the examples show that the invention of oracle bone inscriptions requires Shang people to objectify their subject emotions into the natural objects, through which the beauty of imagery could be seen.

A lot of oracle bone characters are just pictographic, “象形,” which indicates that the character is very similar to the natural object, but they still require subject emotions.

For instance, although the character of “man” ( ) is almost pictographic, the intentional selected profile depicts a hurried man who has to rush about all the time, which differentiates man from animal.  “What we observe in the ancient script are not concrete physical things but shorthand of dynamic postures and movements: a man standing, a man squatting and looking around, and a horse galloping with fluttering mane.”  Oracle bone inscription was invented by ancient people as a totally free creation. It was made up of lines and curves instead of an original depiction of the natural objects. Oracle bone inscriptions of the same object usually differed if they were invented in different geography and different time, which also proved that ancient people had enough freedom.

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10 唐汉。汉字密码。陕西：陕西师范大学出版社。2008. pp. 425
11 Ibid., pp. 396
12 Ibid., pp. 324
to create characters, and the creation was usually based on their subject emotions and thoughts. Oracle bone script expires a sense of “fusion of feeling and scene.” It brings you to an immersed sense that you can see the ancient people are “仰观奎星圆曲之势，俯察龟文鸟迹之象。” During the evolution of Chinese characters, the styles changed from realistic to abstract in a process of sedimentation from content to form. In the process, a meaningful content becomes a meaningful form, which gradually becomes a formal and generalized beauty with the passage of history. What we use today are those characters filling with our ancestors’ emotions. No doubt oracle bone inscription has aesthetic value to us in contemporary period because of its beauty of imagery that has been pursuing by artists and poets for thousands of years.

When I did “Oracle Bone Script Paintings,” I endeavored to paint primitive and mysterious symbols based on my own imagination. As I have mentioned that ancient people had total freedom to create symbols based on their perception, emotion, thoughts and any other subject feelings, oracle bone symbols of the same object usually differed in different geography and different time. Thus, this phenomenon provided me enough reason to create my own oracle bone characters freely, mainly according to my own understandings of each character. My comprehension of the characters might appear subjective to others, but that is my intention. In addition, as oracle bone inscription seems particularly mysterious to us with the passage of time, I tried to apply a traditional painting technique, “broken ink,” to produce my oracle bone paintings.

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14 张彦远（唐）。《法书要录》。北京：人民美术出版社。1984. 第七卷。
Legend says that Chinese characters were invented by Cangjie, who was a bureaucrat of Yellow Emperor. When Cangjie invented characters, he raised his head into the sky observing the migration of starts, and lowered his head facing the earth observing the behavior of animals.
I take one of my “Oracle Bone Script Paintings” here as an example to explain my subjective comprehension of the particular character and the artistic technique applied (Appendix.1). This character is “mist” (雾 in Chinese). I excerpted the definition of “mist” from “Shuo Wen Jie Zi”¹⁵(说文解字 in Chinese), written by Xu Shen (ca. 58 CE- ca. 147 CE), and included it in the work. I quote the definition that is in formal and simple words here, that is, “地气发，天不应，”¹⁶ which literally means that, while the ground vapor evaporates reaching the sky, the sky does not respond to it. This vivid, poetic and even beautiful explanation of “mist” almost made me feel as though I fell into a world of cherished melancholy. The definition to me expresses an aura of melancholy, mystery, and reluctance. I painted a longing eye that stood for a man in a helmet. The man’s arms and legs were trying to reach out of the huge helmet as far as he could, as if he wanted to escape. The character “mist” was produced based on the fact that it prevented people from seeing clearly¹⁷, but to me it somehow imparts to us a gloomy feeling, with which the strong might try hard to escape from the fate while the cowardly might just fall into a decline. The oracle bone inscription of “mist” is “”¹⁸ and later it developed into “”¹⁹ I combined both versions based on my understanding of “mist,” emotion towards it, and imagination.

I applied “broken ink” technique in most of my “Oracle Bone Script paintings.” It was invented by Wang Wei, a Tang Dynasty poet and painter. “It consists mainly in

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¹⁵ 许慎。说文解字。北京：中华书局。2009.
¹⁶ Ibid., pp.242
¹⁷ 唐汉。汉字密码。陕西：陕西师范大学出版社。2008. pp. 254
¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 254
¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 254
controlling the amount and density of the ink on the brush and in broadening his strokes in order to separate the ink-line into ‘fibers’. ”

In other words, color change is influenced by the amount of water added to the ink; when the first layer of ink is still wet, the second layer of darker or lighter ink is directly added to the first layer, leading to ink masses with gradual change of simple color instead of precise outlines. “The completed work looks like a wash drawing.”

Take the painting of “mist” as an example again (Appendix 1). I used water or lighter ink to break the darker part; and also, when necessary I dropped water to the wet part directly to shade some areas. The gradual change of simple color produced by “broken ink” technique hopefully can create a sense of mystery and unpredictability, which inspires us to wonder.

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21 Ibid., pp. 104
In my “Characters Paintings,” I create paintings by accumulating characters layer by layer. I did not write random Chinese characters; I chose a specific Chinese poem whose poetic sense was close to the aura each painting reflected. One of the reasons I used a poem, specifically, is because it enabled me to write coherently and continuously without hesitation to obtain Qi (气 in Chinese). Qi, one of the essentials of Chinese art, is the spirit and breath not only inside the stroke, but also between continuous characters. It is obtained when one’s mind moves along with the movement of the brush and does not hesitate in delineating images.\(^{22}\) I endeavored to write the entire poem without pausing, with a vague or not so vague image already conceived in my mind, and then re-dipped the ink to continue writing until an image was finished.

In terms of aesthetic and technical perspective, the calligraphic brush stroke is the dominant element in traditional Chinese painting. “Everything that the Chinese painter produces on his painting surface, in all its thousands of variations, derives originally from exactly the same principles as the simple brush stroke of calligraphy.”\(^{23}\) For example, usually a calligrapher uses “Zhongfeng” (中锋) when he/she writes. “Zhongfeng” can be translated as “the central cutting power of the brush,” which refers to keeping the brush point-tip always in the middle of the stroke. Before understanding “Zhongfeng,” it is necessary to understand the Chinese brush. Chinese brushes are made up of hairs with different length. The tip consists of the longest hairs, around which there is a layer of shorter hairs. The length of the hairs becomes gradually shorter and shorter starting from


\(^{23}\) Ibid., pp.32
the tip. When a brush is lifted after it is pressed on a paper, it returns to its original shape automatically. “Zhongfeng,” as mentioned, is a kind of rule of writing in brush that the brush tip should always be in the middle of a stroke, by holding the brush perpendicular to the paper when one “runs” calligraphy. In fact, traditional painting also adopts the same rule. Usually a traditional artist has learned pictorial signs or type forms which constitute the artistic “vocabulary,” just like a calligrapher has learned different strokes and characters before writing. Except the brushstrokes of painting a bamboo and anything thick that is required to finish in one stroke, most of the pictorial signs of “literati painting” follow the rule of “Zhongfeng” that one does not use the side of the brush to paint. My paintings are mainly made up of “Zhongfeng” strokes since I composed images by writing characters again and again. I regard this as an effective technique, taking advantage of the characteristics of calligraphy, and also highlighting that the painting method is interlinked with calligraphy. I prefer the terminology “writing a painting” than “painting a painting” to describe the process of producing my artwork.

In addition, the saying, “诗画本一律,” which refers to “poetry and paintings sharing the same principles,” inspired me to integrate poetry into painting. Both poetry and painting are havens for emotional release. In the Book of Documents (2/3/18), the definition of poetry is that “poetry gives voice to the intent.”24 The emotions are moved within, and take shape in words. That is to say, in the heart it is intent; when expressed in words it is a poem. In a similar manner, when expressed in brushstrokes, it is a painting. When a painting is not enough to express the intent, one can write inscriptions on it to

advance the ideas. Therefore, poetry and painting have a sort of complementary relationship.

Poetic inscriptions reached the status of a literary genre in the Song Dynasty when Su Shi (1037-1101 A.D.) and Huang Ting Jian (1050-1100 A.D.) advanced the idea that poetic inspiration derived from the same source as pictorial inspiration. Su Shi has stated, “Poetry and painting are one and the same thing.” The works of Wang Wei, a poet, a painter and an official in the imperial court from the Tang Dynasty, gave rise to the saying, “poetry is verbal painting and painting is non-verbal poetry.” Su Shi said of Wang Wei’s work, “there is painting in his poetry; and there is poetry in his painting.” The former part of this remark means that Wang’s poems have a deep poetic conception and that Wang is adept at using imagery as the embodiment of emotions. The latter part refers to the fact that within Wang’s paintings, a beautiful picturesque scene is depicted. In order to make a poem into a verbal painting and to make a painting into a form of non-verbal poetry, the traditional Chinese painters did not depict the details of an individual natural object or copy the object realistically, but rather they captured the scene as a whole to highlight its essence. The “spirit” or the “connotation” of a painting is very important.

To sum up, calligraphy, painting and poetry are closely intertwined. This allowed my artwork to have the effect of “triple stimulation” to the audience. One may not be able to tell what the characters in the paintings are, but these characters, existing as a poem, play a symbolic role. As a poem, the accumulated characters support the meaning or

26 ibid., pp.72
philosophy of the painting, which may strike a responsive chord with the viewers; as individual characters, they suggest that the principles of painting originate from those of calligraphy. In fact, there are some famous intellectuals who devoted themselves to the in-depth study of these three cultural treasures—calligraphy, painting and poetry. Famous painter Zheng Banqiao, one of the Eight Eccentrics, was respected for representing the “Three perfections—of poetry, calligraphy and painting.” Wu Changshuo is another intellectual who is famous for his in-depth study of calligraphy and painting. (It is worth mentioning here that Mr. Aoyama San’u, the Japanese respectable artist I have mentioned in the Introduction, has studied with Wu Changshuo and got inspiration for calligraphy from him.) Wu Changshuo’s study on Shiguwen, a style of seal script, made his artwork unique and almost made him the first one who painted “modern” ink wash paintings. The whole composition of Wu’s artwork seems to be a seal script character. Furthermore, Wu painted based on calligraphic principles: he drew branches as the way of writing Seal script, pavilions and houses as the way of writing Clerical script, and turned the tip of his brush to represent the concave and convex of stones and mountains. My paintings were produced using different techniques and ideas, but I unintentionally shared the common ground of Wu’s way of painting, that is, painting by calligraphic skills and elements. 

In my exhibition, I mainly created landscape paintings because landscape typifies “nature” without any human artifice for me. In today’s impetuous environment, I am longing to escape to somewhere quiet and far from the materialistic world, to listen to my inner voice, to truly think about what I want and to enjoy mingling with the fresh air given by heaven. I heard from my mum that she had spent her childhood in a village that

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29 Ibid., pp.119
was mainly constituted by little two-floor houses, lakes and mountains; everything was so simple and seemingly close to the origin of human nature. I did not understand why adults so often mentioned their beautiful “countryside” and their past simple lives when I was a child, but now I can understand why. One occasionally needs to set aside impetuous mood intrigued by the realistic world, even though one has to live in the realistic world. This reminds me of some intellectuals in Chinese history, who had to serve for the imperial court, but at the same time pursued an easier and more spiritual life, such as living as a hermit in a mountain. They were trying to seek a balanced lifestyle, navigating between two contradictory paths: their career as a court official and their lifelong devotion to nature.

Among these intellectuals, some might be spiritual seekers but some might be fevered office seekers. In a spiritual aspect, closeness to nature enabled one to achieve the state of “oneness with the Dao.” Zhuangzi’s Daoist philosophy claimed that the ideal personality is not a learned or accomplished person, but a natural person who is at one with heaven, earth and the universe. Besides, “the unchanging natural landscape is eternal while the hustle and bustle of life is short-lived, and therefore, the natural landscape is considered superior to the transient sumptuousness of the human world.” For this reason, the moralists endeavored to integrate themselves into nature. From a pragmatic point of view, Confucian scholar intellectuals who did not obtain recognition in imperial court viewed closeness to nature as a comfort. Regardless of what those

31 Ibid., pp.94
32 Ibid., pp.95
33 Ibid., pp.97
intellectuals were seeking, nature appeared to be fundamental for the intellectuals in Chinese history.

When I “wrote” landscape paintings, I felt I was brought back to a poetic and beautiful period in which I could communicate with those literati ancestors. As mentioned, my artwork is supposed to impress the viewers by the effect of “Triple Stimulation,” which is the combination of “Three Perfections”—calligraphy, painting and poetry in one piece of work; in fact, during the process of producing artwork, I experienced the so-called “Triple Stimulation” as well. I murmured the poem, quickly running the calligraphy again and again with the vague or not so vague frames of pictures conceived in my mind: I immersed myself in the art without too much consciousness. The world seemed static, while only my mind, mouth and hand were dynamic. This situation reminds me of Wang Wei’s poems, which are full of “emptiness” and “silence” as well as sudden motion. I have included Wang Wei’s poem, Living in the Mountain on an Autumn Night, in my painting Home (家 in Chinese) (Appendix 2). “After fresh rain on the empty mountain, comes evening and the cold of autumn. The full moon burns through the pines, a brook transparent over the stones. Bamboo trees crackle as washerwomen go home, and lotus flowers sway as a fisherman’s boat slips downriver. Though the fresh smell of grass is gone, a prince is happy in these hills.”\(^\text{34}\) These beautiful lines reflect the coexistence of emptiness, silence, and sudden motion. “Emptiness” and “silence” are the symbols of annihilation of consciousness. The sudden motion reflects the sense of “instantaneous enlightenment,”\(^\text{35}\) which may infuse my


painting with a transcendent and poetic sense.

In conclusion, I took advantage of the features of calligraphy, poetry and painting when I produced my artwork. The close relationship between these “three perfections” also inspired my ideas for “Characters Paintings.” Furthermore, my fascination towards the past and cultural roots encouraged me to work innovatively on landscape paintings, which stand for closeness to nature.
IV. Artist’s Words

I hope both sections of my artwork will lead the viewers on an impressive journey to the cultural origin of Huaxia either by tracing back to the primitive “Oracle bone period” or by seeking to reconnect with cultural roots in “nature.” With the passage of time, Chinese characters have evolved into practical symbols, which may lose its original charm to our eyes; the traditional treasures such as painting, calligraphy and poetry may also have to step down from their original position in today’s impetuous society.

However, the uniqueness of China is its long history as well as its resplendent culture, in which the whole Chinese civilization was recorded. My exhibition, on one hand, is designed to express my own fascination towards Chinese culture and the curiosity towards my cultural roots; on the other hand, it is designed to arouse people’s consciousness and desire to preserve those priceless cultural heritages, especially when the modern social environment is fast-paced and impulsive.

As I always believe in the saying that “there are a thousand hamlets in a thousand people’s eyes,” I was interested to know my viewers’ reactions to the artwork. I have included a reflective report written by one of the viewers, Yiming Zeng (Elvis), who had looked at my paintings before they were displayed. He wrote his thoughts without knowing any of my artistic intentions, which offers a new perspective on the artwork.
V. A Detour To The Origin: Truth, Goodness and Beauty

Yiming Zeng (Elvis)

Today, hanzi (Chinese characters) function almost in the same way that Western alphabets or words do, as a necessary tool for people communicating thoughts and ideas in daily life. Although people can convey their emotions or opinions through the characters that serve as a medium for human interaction, they are no longer capable of appreciating the inner values of characters as an aesthetic derivative of our life, a highly compact representation of truth, goodness, and beauty (in Chinese characters, 真善美). Though these values are represented in abstract forms (i.e. the characters), they can be recognized as having practical features that can help people better understand nature and themselves. Characters originate from life, and they are now on a long journey to their origin.

Hanzi distinguish themselves from most of other presently existing languages in the sense that they initially imitate real life to a large extent. One of Aiai’s paintings, Dancing (舞) (Appendix 3), vividly depicts a scene in which an elegant ballet dancer is performing a solo piece. The idea embedded in this painting is the inseparability of characters and life. The painting is the character itself, and the character is the imitation of dancing in real life. Hanzi attain their truth (真) dating back to the time they were first created, and it has a firm ground in the natural world. In this sense, hanzi seem to be part of Tao (道), or the Way, which signifies the fundamental nature of the universe.

According to Tao Te Ching, “Man models himself on the Earth; The Earth models itself on Heaven; Heaven models itself on the Way; and the Way models itself on that which is so on its own” (人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然) (25). This statement implies that
our nature might be the thing that the Way models itself on, or at least it is close to the Way, since it is a thing in itself in a deontological sense. Therefore, we may be able to understand Tao through the observation of our nature. In the same way, we can better understand and even learn to experience the truth in hanzi if we see them as grounded in our nature. Furthermore, if we consider this standpoint to be the cornerstone on which our evaluation of the truth inside hanzi is based, the truth itself acquires subjective values with respect to different individuals, rather than simply a universally accepted meaning referring to a particular thing. Every individual is a member in the world, and every single interpretation shapes and contributes to the truth. We bestow meanings and values on hanzi based on our empirical emotions, understanding of the truth, and even our personal qualities. In this sense, the personal values granted to hanzi indicate a second important trait of the characters—the goodness (善).

The essence of Chinese calligraphy is that every character is a representation of a person’s inner activities and virtues, in a word, goodness. According to an influential scholar in Han Dynasty, Yang Xiong (扬雄), “words are the voice of mind; characters are the paintings of mind. From the voice and the paintings, we can know who is gentleman and who is petty man” (Fayan;法言). The goodness revealed in hanzi does not depend on its definition. Rather, it is the person who determines the goodness of a character. For example, if we look at the character “好” (“good” in Chinese) in Times New Roman printed in any Microsoft Word document, we will not consider the character to be good because it does not reflect anything of personal value but merely its mechanical appearance. However, if we take a look at Aiai’s painting, Life (命) (Appendix 4), we may be able to grasp the goodness of this character. In this picture, a man bears a huge
mountain on his back and kneels down on the ground with his hands pushing up while a
big mouth (囗) yells at him from behind. It is reasonable to imagine that the man is
overwhelmed by the burden he suffers in life, and he always obeys what other people tell
him to do without any freedom. This scene imitates the life of thousands and thousands of
people in China, especially the working class: they are facing the rocketing prices of
goods, worrying about not having any social security and little social welfare, and are
concerned about the high cost of medical care and education for their children. The big
mouth in the painting may be of their living burden, which forces them to suffer in order
to live, or more precisely under this situation, to survive. The big mouth may also be of
the heaven—a divine command they have to obey, or a destiny they have to accept. In
their life, they can only see darkness; they have no hope, but only obedience. Such life is
not good, but the character is showing the goodness. From my perspective, Aiai’s
painting reveals her care and sympathy for the living conditions, physically and mentally,
of Chinese people nowadays. This empathy further implies her questioning the policies of
current government, which fail to protect the basic needs or welfare of a majority of
working people. Aiai may also suggest that in order to have a good life, one should first
stand up, which in turn shows Aiai’s hope for these people. In this sense, in spite of the
badness of life the character is reflecting, it is granted human goodness, which is full of
care, concern and hope. The character becomes alive, humane, and virtuous.

The truth and goodness of *hanzi* constitute their beauty, as well as that of the mind
and more importantly, of life. For instance, Aiai’s painting, *Home (家)* (Appendix 2), not
only conveys a feeling of nostalgia—the beauty of mind, but also manifests an
appreciation of the beauty of life. At first glance, many of the unrecognizable characters
dissolve in the clouds and the mountains, and we can by no means know what the characters are saying by referring to their definition. One may ask that how they can reveal anything if we cannot recognize them. In fact, we can understand the characters without even knowing what they are saying. If we look at the houses below, we can see that the tiles and windows are made up of the characters “家,” and there are an elderly person, two parents, and a child walking nearby. This scene alludes to the memory of the Aiai’s childhood and reveals a strong sense of nostalgia for Aiai’s being away from home in the United States for four years. Those unrecognizable characters might be Aiai’s mumbling words while she is having a dream at night. Maybe she cannot remember what she has said, but she must be able to feel it. Furthermore, in Chinese tradition, living away from one’s parents is a guilt one may feel. According to Analects, “While your parents are alive, do not journey afar. If a journey has to be made, your direction must be told” (Liren 里仁, 4:19). As a student studying abroad for years, with an unpredictable future, Aiai may often think of her parents who must be missing her every day, and the guilt in turn transforms into her motive to live with passion and hope, even alone in an unfamiliar country. Such transformation is a sign of inner growth, and indeed is the beauty of mind and life. In addition, the idea of imprinting hanzi in the scenery is in accordance with the truth that hanzi originate from life. Only when the characters are part of natural landscapes and human life, we can better understand the truth, the goodness, the beauty of them, and of the person who attaches these features to them. As a matter of fact, characters are life, rather than a functional tool for human communication. From the standpoint of characters, we better appreciate the beauty of life. Likewise, as we are
rooted in life, we better appreciate the beauty of characters. Characters originate from life, and they are now on a long journey to their origin.
Appendix

1. Mist, 雾

2. Home, 家
3. Dancing, 舞

4. Life, 命
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