Water calligraphy: a living aesthetics in China's south-western cities

Changsha; Guiyang; Chongqing; dishu; living aesthetics; calligraphy; urban

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Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) re-opened to the world in 1978, Chinese cities have become the driving force for unprecedented economic transformations (F. Wu 2007; Campanella 2008; Marinelli 2015). By creating competitive global cities, the central government has attempted to attract investments and improve its soft power through spectacular skylines and waterfronts, ambitious engineering projects and profitable creative parks and industries. However, an array of bottom-up, public, and ordinary practices have caught on and counterbalanced the urban *spectacle* (Debord, 1967). These include spontaneous and everyday practices, such as water calligraphy (Figure 1), which are performed by urban dwellers in public spaces. Mostly practised by elderly in the parks, water calligraphy consists of writing Chinese characters on the ground with water using a big brush. In this article, I posit that water calligraphy is both a new development of the traditional *literati* art, which can contribute to an aesthetics of the *living*, and a kinetic, bodily practice, which allows the practising retirees to reclaim their social and spatial agency in the urban space.

< Insert Figure 1: Author's photograph of water calligraphy in Lieshi Park, Changsha, 4 June 2023. >

This study was conducted through mixed qualitative research methods, ranging from an ethnographic to a more art historical approach. Ingold explains the ethnographic approach as 'a judgment that is cast upon the encounters through a retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering and note-taking which they call forth into pretexts for something else altogether' (2014, p. 389). Moreover, I have leaned towards Pink's sensory ethnography in considering my 'own experiences and the ways these intersect with the persons, places and things encountered during that process' (2015, p. 5). During my three-week-long fieldwork, I interacted with my subjects – water calligraphers practising in parks in the early morning – through semi-structured interviews (MacDougall 2016; Seidman 2006) and participant observation (Ingold 2014). The sample amounts to fifteen subjects, who were all retired and mostly men. My questions, apart from one case, were raised in-person, in Mandarin and ranged from the frequency and location of their practice to their preferred writing style, and again, from the reasons to perform calligraphy outside their private homes to their social interactions. Additionally, I also spoke with passers-by, who would stop to admire the calligraphers, and I tried *dishu* myself to better understand its technicality and physicality. I integrated the primary data collected on the ground with critical theory and philosophical investigation around the tradition of Chinese calligraphy and the existing scholarship on water calligraphy, which is situated in Beijing (Chastanet, 2013; Vermeeren, 2019, 2020, 2022; Zito, 2014). Last, I conducted archival research at the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong and empirical visual analysis of the works by Song Dong and Wang Dongling, taking into consideration the external contexts in which the artworks were produced (Elsner 2010).

My data were collected in Changsha, Guiyang, and Chongqing, where no other studies on *dishu* have been conducted. These cities in southwestern China have experienced a later and slower development compared to the PRC's capital and coastal areas. Contrary to the long-established and leading urban centres like Beijing and Shanghai, these cities are caught in the process of determining their identity and success and, hence, provide a platform to observe simultaneous top-down and bottom-up

practices. Though it is not the aim of this article, *dishu,* as a living aesthetics within these cities, has the potential to become an artistic means to interrogate place-making and society at a time of changing global power relations.

In this essay, I will firstly introduce the discourse around living aesthetics in the context of China and the west. The second section will delve into water calligraphy more widely, reporting my on-site observations of water calligraphy in Changsha, Guiyang and Chongqing. Moreover, I will retrace the overlaps between *dishu*, traditional calligraphy and the experimental art practices by Wang Dongling (b. 1945) and Song Dong (b. 1966). Last, by positioning water calligraphy within China's socio-historical context and, specifically, the urban everyday, I will outline the tension between the ordinary, bottom-up character of water calligraphy and the top-down, spectacular city centres. Finally, this paper aims to demonstrate that water calligraphy can contribute to the discourse of living aesthetics by favouring sensual encounters within the familiar, collective, and slow-paced everyday.

The discourse of living aesthetics

Before delving into water calligraphy, a brief conceptualisation of living aesthetics is due.[1] Whilst living aesthetics defies a unanimous definition, Yuriko Saito describes it as 'any reactions we form toward the sensuous and/or design qualities of any object, phenomenon, or activity' (2007, p. 9). This aesthetics can 'affect and sometimes determine our worldview, actions, the character of a society' as well as 'the physical environment' (Saito, 2007, p. 51). The term *living* aesthetics has emerged to refer to an aesthetics of the everyday that is distinct from Europe and North America and is representative, instead, of other geographies from the Global South. Wang Que explains this aesthetics of the living as 'a return of sensory and spiritual enjoyment and psychological

[1] For a more in-depth examination of the aesthetics of the living in the east and west, please refer to Carter and Liu (2014).

compensation as byproducts of events in life' (2014, p. 175); an approach to the everyday that 'address[es] its very flaws and attempts to improve life through aesthetic appreciation' (2014, p. 179).

In China, the appreciation for the everyday has a long tradition, spanning from the pre-dynastic popularity of rites and music to the Confucian and Daoist emphasis on the living and society (Li, 2009; Liu & Carter, 2014). During the Qing dynasty, several volumes were dedicated to ordinary life and idleness.[2] Jumping forward to the beginning of the 20th century, when China was caught in the civil war and anti-Japanese resistance, there was a resurgence of the discourse around the relationship between arts and the living. Li Zehou argues that whereas in the 1920s, the Literary Association cried for an 'art to serve life', in the following decades, art was instrumentalised to serve the revolution and national salvation (2009, p. 214-5). In the 1940s, the theories by Russian intellectual Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828 – 1889), whose argument was for art to represent and explain reality, found a favourable ground in a context like China where art was increasingly deployed to serve the masses (Li 2009). Chernyshevsky argued that art should not 'be ashamed to admit that its aim is to compensate man, in case he lacks the opportunity to enjoy the full aesthetic pleasure afforded by reality, by reproducing this precious reality as far as possible, and by explaining it for his benefit' (Chernyshevsky, n.d.). Later, during the Maoist era, everyday life, as well as art, assumed a highly political and collective dimension. After years of an ideological and controlled representation of the living, it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that experimental artists such as Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Yin Xiuzhen and Song Dong, among others, started re-engaging with and taking quotidian life as their source of inspiration. Whilst this brief survey does not provide an

[2] These include Li Yu's *Xianqing Ouji* (闲情偶寄 *Casual expressions of idle feeling*, 1671), *Zunsheng bajian* (遵生八箋 *Eight discourses on the art of living*, 1591) by Gao Lian 高濂 (fl. sixteenth century), *Zhangwu zhi* (長物志 *Superfluous things*, 1620s) by Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585–1645), and *Qing bi cang* (清秘藏 *Pure and arcane collecting*, 1695) by Zhang Yingwen 張應文 (fl. sixteenth century) (T. Lu 2022, p. 497).

exhaustive insight into the living aesthetics in China, a subject worth exploring independently, it suggests that the fascination for the living has deep roots in this region.

In the west, the aesthetics of the everyday has only emerged as an academic discourse in the 1930s thanks to intellectuals, artists, and practitioners like John Dewey (1859-1952). Considered the father of everyday aesthetics, Dewey refused an art distinct from everyday life, as expressed in the volume *Art as Experience* (1934). Dewey's ideas of a social life as the starting point for an aesthetic experience (1934) encouraged composer and musician John Cage, together with dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, and artist Robert Rauschenberg to perform futile 'happenings' and engage with the audience as part of their practice in 1952 at Black Mountain Collage in the United States. Alongside these happenings, in the 1960s Fluxus also emerged as a spontaneous and heterogenous group committed to overturn the separation between art and everyday life, as well as oppose institutions.[3] Dewey's concepts along with Fluxus happenings have contributed to the development of a critical discourse on everyday aesthetics. Despite this living aesthetics being discussed in several volumes (Kupfer, 1984; Novitz 1992; Berleant 1991, 2005; Carroll 2001; Light and Smith 2005; Liu and Carter 2014), dissenting voices remain due to its ambiguous definition and the fact that 'aesthetic theory has largely remained grounded in Kant's aesthetics' (Berleant, 2014, p. 5).

In this article, I take Saito's critique of the exclusion of non-art objects from the traditional aesthetics as a starting point to better situate my understanding of living aesthetics. Specifically, Saito criticises artworks for several reasons: they favour sight and hearing to other senses; they are not accessible to everyone and often can only be admired from the distance or in an enclosed space; last, art

[3] Hopkins notices that despite Fluxus' anti-institutional approach, they paradoxically fell into the same trap as commercial products often accompanied certain happenings and manifestations (2000, p. 108).

objects often come with prescribed ways on how to appreciate them, discouraging active imagination and participation (Saito 2007, 18-25). Hence, I view the field of living aesthetics as the aesthetic experiences stimulated by non-art objects and practices which can, in turn, encourage kinetic and bodily encounters, are accessible and can be experienced with no predetermined paradigms. Maintaining this, I will demonstrate that water calligraphy not only has resonance with traditional calligraphy but can also be considered part of this living aesthetics.

Observing water calligraphy

Commonly spotted in parks, water calligraphy is an activity in which elderly write characters on the ground through smooth and rehearsed gestures with water and a life-size brush (Figure 2). This practice first emerged in the 1980s (Vermeeren, 2022, p. 754) alongside the improvement of life conditions in China, the early retirement age and the consequent need for social interaction and physical exercise. My own findings align with the extant scholarship in the context of Beijing and consider water calligraphy as an ordinary, spontaneous, urban activity for women and men retirees to keep fit physically, mentally, and socially. As Zito argues, it 'falls into a crossover between the popular revival of the literati art form of *shufa*, calligraphy, and the craze for various kinds of *qigong*, or traditional martial art exercise for self-cultivation' (2014, p. 11).

< Insert Figure 2: Author's photograph of water calligraphy's equipment, Chongqing, 12 June 2023. >

Among the reasons to practise water calligraphy, retirees choose to go to the park and write because they can simultaneously train their bodies and minds in a natural setting. Many of them proudly admit writing both in the privacy of their homes and in public parks, both with ink and water, on paper and on the ground. Whereas the majority practises in the park for around two hours, two to four times

per week depending on the weather and their own schedule, these retirees often write at home too. Indoors, they might write in their preferred styles and sometimes even compose their own poetry, demonstrating a high degree of rigour and creativity. One interviewee in Lieshi Park in Changsha enthusiastically showed me a poem created by him, as well as other traditional calligraphic works and paintings. He explains that he likes copying Tang poems, as well as texts by Mao Zedong. Moreover, he enjoys writing in running script (*xingshu* 行书), cursive (*caoshu* 草书), and clerical script (*lishu* 隶书). Likewise, in Shaping Park, Chongqing, I encountered a man in his eighties writing with water among other retirees. He declares to have been practising both ink and water calligraphy for more than eight years and proudly unfolds a scroll of ink calligraphy as if to prove his passion and skills. Though their practice in the park might be for fun (Vermeeren, 2022, p. 761), their inkworks and regular activity show their dedication and aesthetic sensibility.

I argue that water calligraphers' choice for this rather than other activities in the park might be linked to calligraphy's association with morality. Moral virtue has been hinted at by my interviewees, as well as recognised in other studies in Beijing (Farquhar, 2009; Farquhar & Zhang, 2012; Vermeeren, 2019, 2022; Yen, 2005; Zito, 2014). One practitioner in Changsha listed some benefits of water calligraphy, including 'increasing memory, cultivating virtue, moral character, develop one's determination, as well as increase concentration and constancy' (*zengjia jiyi, xiu de, qingcao, duanlian yizhi, xiuzhuan xi zhizhi, hengxin yongyuan*, 增加记忆，修德，修情操，锻炼意志，修专心致志，恒心永远).[4] This list of qualities echoes the Chinese aesthetic tradition which viewed beauty and morality as closely interlinked (Li, 2009, p. xii). My interviewee's words are reminiscent of the description of music in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*, ca. 551–479 BC); music could 'improve people's minds, move people deeply, cause customs to change' (cited in Li, 2009, p. 29). In the specific context of calligraphy, writing becomes 'a

[4] Author's in-person and online semi-structured interview in Lieshi Park, Changsha, 5 June 2023. All the quotes and observations about water calligraphers come from my fieldwork in Changsha, Guiyang and Chongqing unless stated otherwise.

mirror of moral quality of a person' (Barrass, 2002, p. 20). It aids proving one's moral stature through the concept of self-cultivation (*zixiu*), which was one of the highest purposes of intellectuals (Goedhuis, 2014, pp. 6–7).

Today, the idea of calligraphy as an art of discipline and, hence, morality seems to be still valid. A woman in Chongqing tells me that calligraphy 'is a very respected activity that shows culture, and she wants to pass on this tradition'. Moreover, many water calligraphers proudly share their age or praise other practitioners for their longevity, as if suggesting that regularly practising calligraphy can lengthen people's lifespan. For instance, a passer-by shares with me his admiration for a dedicated calligrapher in Guiyang, who I later discover being born in 1930, making him ninety-three-years-old. From my observations, the age of practitioners in the parks is often followed by an evaluation of their physical health, hinting at an established, direct correlation between the 'pursuit of artistic excellence' and 'the cultivation of a good body' (Yen 2005, p. 112).

Even though water calligraphers do not intend to enact an artistic performance as such, they certainly care about their engagement with passers-by, choosing crowded and easy-to-find places. During my observations, I have often found practitioners (or been told that I would find them) next to the park entrance, the lake, or not too far away from food shops and other facilities. This suggests that they seem to opt for places where people will eventually pass by and notice them rather than quiet and more enclosed venues. Unsurprisingly, most water calligraphers assert that practising calligraphy outdoors has a social benefit. Whereas they might feel lonely at home, in the park they can enjoy passers-by's company and exchanges. As I talk with a man in his seventies in Eling Park, Chongqing, he assures me that people will come to see him practise soon. While calligraphers certainly enjoy writing for the cultural and social prestige, they most likely perform for their audience too. They often pause to talk with people, show them how to write a certain character in a specific style (Figure 1) and take pride in their tools (Chastanet, 2013; Vermeeren, 2022, pp. 755–757). Though writing outdoors is

mostly motivated by the need for physical and mental exercise, calligraphers' publicness suggests their desire for social interaction and artistic/cultural gratification.

Most passers-by are in awe of these practitioners and would stop to ask questions about their writing and invite them to outline a specific word. In Changsha, I had a humorous encounter with a water calligrapher and an observer, who kept inspecting and calling out the wrong characters (Figure 3). As the calligrapher grew more frustrated, he gave the brush to the other man so that he could write the right characters himself. Whereas this calligrapher would consult a piece of paper to check his text and proceed slowly, more experienced practitioners would move with fluid, swifter and well-measured actions. The ninety-three-year-old calligrapher I met in Qianling Mountain Park, Guiyang made water calligraphy look effortless. With a cigarette between his lips and a heavy-looking bag on his shoulders, he walked backwards whilst writing in cursive without hesitation and unperturbed by the variety of activities happening around him.

< Insert Figure 3: Author's photograph of one water calligrapher alongside some observers, Lieshi Park, Changsha, 6 June 2023. >

Even though retirees deploy water for pragmatic and economic reasons, I believe the use of water and the natural setting conceptually amplify the fleeting and unique aesthetic experience (Figure 4). Maintaining the Chinese view of nature as an infinite source of inspiration and creativity (Ledderose, 2000), it is easy to comprehend water calligraphers' praises towards the beautiful surroundings, clean air and lush trees, as well as their appreciation for an activity that does not pollute the environment. Moreover, I advance that this slow-paced activity allows them to take a break from the urban rhythms and take in the little pleasures of life. The fleetingness of the water characters sublimates the act of

writing, encouraging viewers to seize the present moment and value the process rather than the ultimate result. This is suggested by the amusement and movements of passers-by who follow the calligrapher in their bodily performance, similarly leaning towards the ground and pointing at the strokes with their finger. As the text dries out, from relatively fine and accurate, the characters expand and enlarge, causing the strokes to merge with one another and become unreadable until they completely disappear (Figure 4.2). Observers do not mind walking on the finished characters, implying that water characters are not so 'physically bounded' (Vermeeren, 2019, p. 124) and eternal like their ink counterparts. Overall, I share Vermeeren's thesis (2022, p. 761) that evaporation accentuates the sensual and aesthetic dimension of this form of calligraphy inviting both writers and observers to pause and take in the beauty of these translucent watermarks and transitory movements.

< Insert **Figure 4**: Author's photograph of one water calligrapher practising near the lake in Lieshi Park, Changsha, 4 June 2023; and **Figure 4.2**: Author's photograph of water characters on the ground, Qianlingshan park, Guiyang, 9 June 2023 >

Between tradition and experimentation

Today, calligraphy has moved beyond the established field of fine arts and stretched into the urban sphere, where new and more nuanced expressions of the tradition are possible. For instance, Yen (2005) investigates calligraphic inscriptions in public spaces in relation to power, whereas Iezzi et al.'s ongoing project aims to develop a database to collect different forms of calligraphy in present-day China, ranging from graffiti to decorative and performative arts (n.d.). Water calligraphy can help demonstrate how the boundaries between fine arts, and visual arts and culture have become increasingly porous and can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of aesthetics. Though water calligraphers might not describe their activity as art, they treat it as an extension of traditional calligraphy with the additional physical and social benefits.

Calligraphy has long been considered one of the highest arts in China (Ledderose, 2000, p. 187). Moreover, as the Chinese script has mostly gone unchanged for over two thousand years, it has come to signify China's cultural identity and national unity (Kraus, 1991, pp. 5–6; Ledderose, 2000, pp. 22–23). Kraus argues that 'through calligraphy, individuals are both taught discipline and given a sense of personal participation in a living culture' (Kraus, 1991, p. 7). In the literati tradition, Ledderose posits that 'calligraphers would have to copy other masters' works, transcend formal resemblance and then find their own style' (2000, p. 196).[5] Characters would be measured against balance, force and harmony (Kraus, 1991, p. 8). Only through hard training could the brush move spontaneously (*ziran*) and with vital force (*qi*) and, hence, produce elegant calligraphy (Ledderose, 1986, 2000). 'The style of ease in painting is the most difficult to find… it attains the natural, inimitable, and unexpected' (Li, 2009, p. 94). Agreeing that spontaneity and uniqueness are at the base of calligraphic masterpieces, Ledderose recalls a story about famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi where he was so happy with his work that he wanted to make copies of it but failed to match his earlier performance (1986, p. 38).

Today, not all water calligraphers might be capable of providing highly aesthetic experiences through their fluid, spontaneous, and elegant writing, however, they share the dedication, rigour and respect for this practice with previous masters. In Changsha, the first calligrapher I observed in Lieshi Park wrote with well-paced, measured gestures. The wrist and forearm seemed to do most of the work, whilst his back and torso were bent and leaning forward. As he shifted horizontally, Chinese characters appeared underneath him, from right to left as if a scroll was being unrolled. Borrowing Ledderose's words, one could 'feel the rhythm in the writer's hand, his dexterity and his sensitivity' (1986, p. 35) through the unfolding characters.

[5] Moreover, Ledderose points out that the difference between writing as a professional and artistic practice lies in the aesthetic intention.

The recent cultural and artistic interest in water calligraphy is part of a wider fascination with new forms of calligraphy and ink art in the late twentieth century. Iezzi explains that after centuries of unchanged aesthetic and stylistic criteria, calligraphy began to change due to the unstable political time (2013, 2015). After being repurposed to serve the masses and politics during the Maoist era in the forms of big character propaganda posters (*dazibao*), calligraphy turned into an aesthetic tool for experimentation.[6] The end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and the new Reform era propelled artists and intellectuals to embrace western art discourse and strategies and break away from the tradition and established canons. Those who found inventive ways to investigate 'the power and attraction which the calligraphic lines hold for the Chinese' were avantgarde calligraphers (Barrass, 2002, p. 37).[7]

Art historian Wu Hung has referred to the re-invention of calligraphy and, more widely ink painting (*guohua*), as 'experimental ink painting' (*shiyan shuimo*) (2014, p. 312). Contrary to Barrass, Wu is more careful in linking experimental ink works to the avantgardes and notices a conceptual contradiction: whereas the avantgardes in China arrived from the west and resulted in the adoption of modernist strategies, experimental ink was born out of artists' desire to explore Chinese identity and tradition in innovative ways (Wu, 2013, p. 21). This difference is amplified by the Chinese art system which divides education between Chinese-style (*guohua*) and western-style paintings (*xihua*). As Wu argues, this distinction has come 'to determine not only the structure of art education and the artists' professional identity but also the criteria of art criticism and the venues of exhibition and publication' (2013, p. 19). Interestingly, despite some exceptions (Hearn, 2013), the existing art

[6] For a discussion of *dazibao*, see (Jiang, 2002; Poon, 1978; Sheng, 1990; Yu, 1964; Brodsgaard 1981).
[7] Analysing calligraphy through an art-historical approach, Barrass identifies four different categories: the 'grand tradition' of classical calligraphers and the neo-classicists, which align with the tradition; and the modernist as well as avantgarde calligraphers. Iezzi further explains that whereas the modern trend believes in the continuity with the tradition as elaborated by Wang Dongling, the avantgarde current, represented by the thoughts of Wang Nanming, calls for a disruption with the past (2013).

scholarships seems to treat calligraphers and contemporary artists separately, especially when the former does not completely refuse the tradition or perform a disruption with the past.[8]

Artists Wang Dongling and Song Dong have challenged traditional aesthetic principles and can aid view water calligraphy as a new expression of *shufa*. Wang Dongling is widely renowned for breaking the boundaries of calligraphy (Erickson, 2007, p. 90) and transforming it into a contemporary live performance.[9] Born in Jiangsu province in 1945, during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 76), Wang used to draw big character posters. With the end of the Maoist era, he resumed his ink painting studies and received his MA in from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, China, in 1981 (Barrass, 2007, pp. 81–83; Erickson, 2007, p. 91). Between the 1980s – 1990s, he travelled to Japan and the US and returned to China in 1994. Today, he is Professor in the Calligraphy Department of the China Academy of Fine Art and Director of the Modern Calligraphy Research Centre at the China Academy of Fine Art.

< Insert Figure 5: Author's photograph of Wang Dongling's exhibition view, *Ink. Space. Time.*, Downing College, Cambridge, 26 August 2023. >

Barrass describes Wang's work as involving 'a huge and intense outpouring of dance performance energy', resulting in an 'all-embracing and very physical experience' (2007, pp. 80, 83). The emphasised bodily movements, larger characters and transitoriness of the performance make the work more approachable and direct for a Chinese as well as international audience. In his performances, Wang draws on papers covering the floor of an entire room with a large and tall brush

[8] For instance, Wang Dongling is primarily referred to as a calligrapher and only secondarily as a contemporary artist.
[9] For more information on his work, see: Barrass, 2007; Chang, 2015; Erickson, 2007; Song, 1994; Xu, 2011.

and ink (Figure 5). The resulting characters are big and very visible to the audience who can appreciate them from the same position of the artist. Even though one might not be able to read Chinese characters, one is mesmerised by his amplified gestures, his energetic final strokes and swift movements of the forearm. It results into a slow-placed, tentative dance and a visual messiness achieved through as much intuition as preparation. Wang's novelty and significance in relation to my discussion of water calligraphy lie in the viewers' experience, and the publicness of his performances. As Barrass maintains:

> 'The way the viewer approaches the characters mimics the physical energy that Wang expended to create the piece. Every viewer is brought closer to what it feels like to be a calligrapher. The size of the characters also makes it easier for people to appreciate the extraordinary variety of effects that a leading calligrapher can create with ink and brush' (2007, p. 80).

By hoping to immerse the viewers into the ephemeral and performative writing process, Wang's performances tend to resist the prescribed way to exhibit and appreciate calligraphic works.

Traditionally, calligraphic works have been confined to the museum and art galleries, where directors and curators would determine the way to approach and engage with the collection. There, calligraphic masterpieces might hang on the walls or be exhibited lying on a flat surface; they might be protected with glass cases and come with carefully written texts and explanations to contextualise them. In the public realm, in turn, the inscriptions on buildings and the 20th century revolutionary *dazibao* would be taken in from a bottom-up perspective. The characters, slogans and messages would be hanging over people's head and could be viewed only by directing the gaze above. Distance and the higher situatedness produced a sense of reverence and authority inherent within the writing, which differs from Wang Dongling's or water calligraphy's approachability and physical vicinity.

The use of water in contemporary art practices can reinforce the innovative, aesthetic potential of water calligraphy. The concept of water as a medium evoking ephemerality, fluidity and the concept

of time have all been explored in the visual arts, specifically by Ephemeral Art and Material Art trends in Europe and China, respectively. Ephemeral Art emerged with Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus group in the 1960s and was later revived by British land artist, Andy Goldsworthy, who has worked with snow, ice, flowers and further transient objects.[10] On the other hand, Material Art was a branch of contemporary Chinese art that developed in the 1980s as artists wanted to express their 'unconventionality, lament social concerns, as well as disregard art's commercial value by deploying unusual materials' (H. Wu and Cacchione, 2019: 14, 25). Both Ephemeral and Material art trends privileged processes over end-results to defy the established art canon and the capitalist market.

In China, the interest in ephemeral and unconventional materials has characterised the practice by Beijing-based artist, Song Dong.[11] Born in Beijing, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, he graduated in oil painting in 1989 from Capital Normal University in Beijing, and later switched to video, performance, and installation. He belongs to a generation of artists who departed from personal experiences to give renewed significance to their everchanging locales and everyday life through seemingly futile actions. Since 1992, Song has thoroughly explored the possibilities offered by the medium of water through a variety of conceptual and experimental works, including the performances *Stir-fry water* (1992), *Writing Time with Water* (1995), *A Pot of Boiling Water* (1995), and the installation *Secret Divulging (Leaking)* (1995). Furthermore, works, such as *Water Records* (2010), *Traceless Stele* (2016) and *Writing Dairy with Water* (2018), invited the audience to participate in the act of writing, bringing forth aesthetic ideals of social inclusion, engagement as well as playfulness, which can be traced in *dishu* too.

[10] See Joseph Beuys (2004, pp. 93-96).
[11] For more details on Song Dong's *oeuvre*, please refer to Lin (2019); N.a. (2002), (2019); Shen (2008); Song Dong (n.d.); Walsh (2002); O'Callaghan (2010): Lin (2020).

Water Diary (1995 - ongoing) is a long-term project that carries resemblances with the practice of water calligraphy in the artist's use of water to record his thoughts on a piece of stone through the brush. Only four photographs document the process as characters gradually dry up and leave nothing but their evocative absences, hinting at the transitoriness of life. Nancy P. Lin asserts that water is imbued with 'deep metaphysical significance' (Lin, 2019, p. 187). By being transparent, translucent and impalpable, water 'provides opportunities for artistic reflections on presence, absence, action, trace, and impermanence' (Lin, 2019, p. 187). Rather than a spectacular performance, for Song, writing is an intimate gesture practiced daily, which has gradually turned into a ritual. Song reveals that 'after a while this stone slowly became a part of me. […] a part of life' (cited in N.a., 2002). Not only does the writing beat the rhythm of everyday life, but the appearance and disappearance of strokes and characters turn into a cathartic act to let go of thoughts and feelings, becoming one of life's pleasures (Clarke, 1999).[12] Extended to water calligraphy, this practice is not merely a fun, leisure activity for training the mind and body, but also has the potential to enhance a sense of time and aesthetic, personal fulfilment for the people who practice and observe it.

If Wang and Song are praised for reinventing traditional calligraphy and, specifically, for engaging with the audience and replacing ink with a natural, impermanent element, then it is possible to argue that water calligraphy achieves a similar thing by allowing ordinary citizens to explore writing at their own convenience in the public, urban setting. Indeed, the observers of water calligraphy have an overarching view over the text, can freely walk or even step on the vanishing characters, and can directly talk with the amateur calligraphers (Figure 6). Furthermore, by being regularly performed in non-art spaces, water calligraphy is easily accessible and encourages accidental interactions. Drawing from Saito, non-conventional art practices (and here I would include water calligraphy too) 'are free

[12] Translated from Mandarin '*shenghuo de yi ge lequ* (生活的一个乐趣)'.

from those expectations and conventions governing the institutional artworld and they can be a source of aesthetic appreciation' (2007, p. 27).

< Insert Figure 6: Author's photograph of people and mini-car walking and driving over the water characters, Lieshi Park, Changsha, 4 June 2023. >

Towards a lived, urban aesthetics

The everydayness and familiarity associated with water calligraphy make this phenomenon an exemplary living aesthetics. This aesthetics of the living celebrates ordinariness and familiarity whilst opposing the recent obsession with strangeness and spectacle (Haapala, 2005, p. 51). Whereas strangeness should not be understood in ontological sense but as the common 'experience we all have in new environments', familiarity is the process through which 'we make the environment our own' and through which we create relations that are significant for us and serve our purposes and interests (Haapala, 2005, pp. 43–44). In this sense, the park where calligraphers perform and socialise turns into a *place* – 'something we have made meaningful' (Haapala, 2005, p. 45) – as opposed to the urban surroundings – something indexical for strangeness and spectacle due to the dramatic socio-economic and urban transformations since 1978.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the PRC entered a new phase in history and so did the Chinese people. The urban population skyrocketed from 18% in 1978 to 65% of the total Chinese population in 2021 (United Nations Population Division, 2018). This urban shift implied the construction of 'infrastructures, such as dams, highways, as well as shopping mall, science parks, airports, container ports and cultural institutions' (Harvey, 2012, pp. 11–12). Since the Reform and Opening Up, urban and architectural practices have catered to the growing desire for

spectacular, young, and extraordinary cities. Authorities and urban planners have privileged commercial, industrial, and residential areas and an individualist and spectacular lifestyle over a collective and familiar one (Lu, 2006, p. 142). Simultaneously, the quality of life improved, people had more money, and several moved to private flats with the downside of less communal life.[13] Today, the early retirement age, longer lifespan alongside having children who might work abroad or in different cities have left a high number of elderly people alone and with plenty of time (Farquhar and Zhang 2012, pp. 26-8).[14]

Over a few decades, a more 'fragmented, divided and conflict-prone' (Harvey, 2012, pp. 14–15) city emerged, causing a transformation in lifestyle. Henri Lefebvre investigated this shift in everyday life in connection with the western city and, more widely the modern world, through the notion of alienation (1991). Lefebvre's alienation should be understood in Marxist terms as *estrangement* – the condition when labour results in something separated from the workers themselves. 'It means that the life which he [the worker] has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien' (Marx, 1844, p. 29). This results in an alienating 'Quotidian' – a nineteenth century invention in response to a stressful, capitalist modernity and need for distraction (Lefebvre, 1971, p. 38). Applied to the context of urbanisation in China, alienation is the loss of touch with an increasingly fast-paced, individualistic, and continuously renewing everyday. China's socio-economic changes are even more unsettling for those elderly who grew up during the Maoist era and currently need to redefine their social role – as retirees – in a more stratified and highly urbanised society.

[13] For a more in-depth analysis of China's new middle class and the real estate market, see Zhang, Li. (2010), *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University.
[14] Many retirees practising water calligraphy but also square dancing and other park activities have shared these observations during my fieldwork. Reuters reported that China's retirement age might increase (Master 2023). With regards to aging population, the elderly grew from 4.9% in 1982 to 14.9% in 2022 according to China's National Bureau of Statics (2023). For demographics data on life expectancy, aging population, and GDP among others, see National Bureau of Statistics of China (2023), 'China Statistical Yearbook', stats.gov.cn, https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2023/indexeh.htm, accessed 15/01/2024.

Many calligraphers were born between the 1940s – 1960s and, hence, were either young adults or children during the strenuous years of the Cultural Revolution. At that time, everyday life was collectively organised around working units (*danwei*), which 'integrated work, housing and a variety of social facilities such as nurseries, canteens, clinics, and shops in close proximity within its walled compounds' (Lu, 2006, p. 2). Lu maintains that free time was spent doing collective activities imposed by the Party, such as radio gymnastics among other sports (2006, p. 145). Moreover, she reports that life in post-1949 China was characterised by scarcity – the condition of not having enough (Lu, 2006, p. 7).[15] People were poor, had little (if none) leisure time and experienced political hardships.[16] As Farquhar and Zhang conclude, retirees 'are old enough to remember — indeed, they cannot forget — the Maoist past, when state-mandated disciplines extended to all aspects of everyday life, and they are connected to the neoliberal present through the tense and competitive careers of their children' (2012, p. 27).

Maintaining Lefebvre's understanding of the everyday as a counterreaction to the value assigned to labour and modernity (1991), I echo the existing scholarship (Zito 2014; Vermeeren 2019, 2022; Farquhar and Zhang 2012) in arguing that water calligraphy in urban China allows its practitioners to regain agency over their lives and cities, especially as they retire from their jobs. Admittedly, Farquhar and Zhang notice that 'the daily life that seems to be destroyed by any shift into more private, "bourgeois" styles of urban spacetime is also in a strict sense artificial; it has always been contingent on some kind of urban imaginary and deliberate programme' (2012, p. 64). Hence, one needs to recognise the diverse temporalities embodied in water calligraphers and their practice (Farquhar and

[15] This condition 'was so powerful that the Chinese state quickly conceptualised the nation as one of scarcity' (Lu, 2006, p. 9).
[16] Author's in-person interview with anonymous water calligrapher in Eling Park, Chongqing, 12 June 2023.

Zhang 2012, p. 28).[17] While *dishu* is rooted in the long-established tradition of calligraphy, this activity mirrors the shifting needs of the elderly, urban population. Contrary to their parents who experienced economic hardships and whose lives were organised around working units and communal activities, today's retirees have plenty of free time alone. Hence, they tap into their memories of collective experiences and go to the park to allow new forms of social relations and places to be shaped. Drawing from Lefebvre, I advance that water calligraphy expresses 'a new social need with a spontaneous character, which social organization […] has directed, sharpened, shifted and modified' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 32).

Bourdieu argues that:

> 'One's relationship to the social world and to one's proper place in it is never more clearly expressed than in the space one claims with one's body in physical space through a bearing and gestures that are self-assured or reserved, expansive or constricted and through the interaction time one appropriates it' (1996, p. 476).

Indeed, the *habitus* of these practitioners, alongside their spare time and boredom (Vermeeren, 2019, p. 123), have certainly informed their choice of leisure activity in the public sphere.[18] Amidst the transience and relative socio-cultural changes that have characterised China in the last fifty years, water calligraphy turns into a familiar strategy to anchor retirees to their everchanging urbanities. Though calligraphers admit that in the past there was no time for activities like *dishu*, there is a continuity in the need for social interaction, communal life and, hence, familiarity. Moreover, these practitioners embody the material paucity that was typical of the Cultural Revolution by praising their medium for being inexpensive and re-purposed. They prefer forms of 'cheap amusement' (Lu, 2006, p. 146) instead of the various entertaining and commercial activities available in the city. More than

[17] Whereas the authors' argument applies to collective, grassroots practices in public parks more widely, the same can be said for water calligraphy.
[18] Bourdies defines *habitus* as a 'system of dispositions' which produces lifestyles (1996, p. 7).

aesthetic, the pragmatic choices of deploying water, building their own brushes with recycled materials, and gathering in public parks belong to a 'set of distinctive preferences' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 169) of this past generation.

Yen even argues that calligraphy is so intrenched 'in the social fabric of everyday life' that it should be referred to as 'social calligraphy' (Yen, 2005, p. 3). More than a form of writing and artistic expression, social calligraphy has an impact on the ordinary lives of Chinese people (Ibid.).[19] In the case of water calligraphy, this practice not only makes retirees feel mentally, spiritually, and socially fulfilled, but it allows them to recuperate a disappearing sense of communality. For most water calligraphers who draw on the ground, the chance for social interaction stems from accidental encounters with other enthusiastic passers-by, even though sometimes they might be in conversation with other calligraphers.[20] However, in Shapingba Park in Chongqing, I encountered a slightly different form of water calligraphy which has a higher degree of collectivity (Figure 7). Half standing and half sitting, a group of ten men and women in their seventies and eighties took turns in writing characters with water. Rather than spilling water onto the ground like most water calligraphers observed so far, they wetted a rectangular fabric handscroll. This exercise has a conviviality that is more alike other activities in the park (i.e., square dancing, Taiji and badminton). Practitioners know each other thanks to regular meetings throughout the years and even have a WeChat group to coordinate social activities outside the park. Whereas this unique form of water calligraphy allows for social exchanges that are less accidental and develop with time, *dishu*, more widely, can shape these practitioners' mode of existence by enhancing and forming social bonds.

[19] Though Yen coins the term 'social calligraphy' (2005) in relation to calligraphic inscriptions in public spaces, this concept is useful to highlight the social dimension of water calligraphy.
[20] One of my interviewees in Changsha tells me that although he practises on his own, he is in touch with another water calligrapher with a similar interest in poetry.

<Insert Figure 7: Author's photograph of collective water calligraphy on fabric, Shapingba Park, Chongqing, 11 June 2023. >

This being the first encounter with women practitioners, it is worth observing that traditionally, calligraphy has always been overruled by scholarly men. Writing in a refined and erudite manner was a demonstration of knowledge and, even more significantly, a display of social and political status (Ledderose, 1986, 2000; Yen, 2005). Admittedly, Yen asserts that some women from wealthy and literary families enjoyed this art to some extent (2005, p. 130).[21] However, this was the exception, and their abilities were often deemed as ornaments and measured against elegance, prettiness, and clarity rather than creativity and talent (Yen, 2005). Though most water calligraphers are still men, the socio-cultural background is diverse and there are women too. One of my interviewees in Chongqing states that 'everyone is welcome to practice' and adds that 'what they all have in common is the love for calligraphy'. In the same group of calligraphers, I talked with three women: one coming from a family of calligraphers who picked this skill up again in memory of her father and her regained free time; a woman in her late seventies who decided to learn calligraphy from books inspired by the beauty and the pleasure gained through this activity; and last, a minute lady who shily admits having a poor education and writing skills. This latter one writes miniscule water characters on the cloth and immediately puts away the handscroll as if embarrassed with the result. Despite her self-consciousness, her participation alongside other more educated women and men in the group, suggests a potential departure from a traditionally men-dominated practice. Overall, I argue that this ordinary, spontaneous, and congregational form of calligraphy can help rethink what in the past was a traditionally exclusive artform 'monopolised by the political elite' (Ledderose, 1986, p. 50).

[21] Yen adds that also nuns and prostitutes viewed calligraphy as a potential means to social climbing and, hence, should be mastered (2005, p. 130).

Vermeeren maintains that water calligraphy - as an everyday, grassroot activity - brings forth a non-canonical form of creativity (2022, pp. 765–766). This 'vernacular creativity' resists the understanding of creativity as 'merely contributing to economic and urban development, and to the idea of creativity as the property of particular individual geniuses' (Vermeeren, 2022, pp. 750–751). Indeed, since Florida's theorisation of a creative class which can bring capital to the city (2012), urban planners, real estate developers and authorities have taken in the concept of creativity to satisfy their economic gains. They have gentrified and aestheticized neighbourhoods (if not entire urbanities) and enforced a carefully designed image of what a cultural and creative city should look like (Scott, 2013, pp. 385–386). Since the Eleventh Five-Year-Plan, China has also recognised and enhanced the key role of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) in increasing the national soft power and economic growth.[22] The result has been a boom of CCIs across China (i.e., Beijing's 798 Art District, Shanghai's M50, Shenzhen's OCT Loft, Chongqing's Tank Loft, among others) which privilege the new, young and spectacular rather than fostering diversity, multiplicity and ordinariness. Within these popular, entertaining, and young urbanities, water calligraphy proclaims an opposite narrative of everydayness, familiarity, and retirement and resists the digital celebration and reproduction of space through its on-site, lived performance.

Water calligraphy attests to the creative agency of retirees who mix moments of communal life, material paucity and childhood memories of being taught calligraphy with the current socio-historical context. This familiarity provides a reassuring stability which, in turn, makes *dishu* ordinary and harder to notice against the spectacle of Chinese cities (Haapala 2005). Nevertheless, observing this everyday activity is like capturing a still of life, peeking into someone's existence, and where beauty lies. According to Light and Smith, 'beauty is to be found in familiar things' (2005, pp. 10–11) and, I argue, in ordinary activities like *dishu*, which provide comforting aesthetic experiences. Admittedly,

[22] See Keane (2009) for more research on the concept of 'creative industries' in China.

Vermeeren argues that water calligraphy is still 'susceptible to commercialisation and is currently undergoing commodification' (2022, p. 764). The central government has started instrumentalising this grassroots and popular activity to promote Chinese culture, from featuring *dishu* performances in the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games to organising groups, competitions, and festivals (Vermeeren, 2022, p. 754). However, in cities like Changsha, Guiyang and even Chongqing, the limited number of water calligraphers I encountered seemed to maintain their independence and practised for their own pleasure.

Conclusion

Throughout the paper, I have advanced that water calligraphy is not merely a physical exercise but is also imbued with aesthetic potential. I argue that water calligraphy can point to a new contemporary expression of *shufa*, which operates at the edges of the established aesthetic canon. Whilst it bears resemblances with traditional calligraphy in the overall aesthetic principles (i.e., spontaneity, rigour), water calligraphy is practised by amateur retirees rather than trained artists or calligraphers. Instead of merely fulfilling an aesthetic goal, *dishu* has a variety of purposes, including training the body and mind, socialising and taking control over one's leisure time. Even though water calligraphy does not intend to be experimental, its transient and performative aspects is reminiscent of the avantgarde artworks by Wang Dongling and Song Dong, which marked a rupture with the tradition. Maintaining the aesthetic principles of Chinese calligraphy and its more contemporary development, I advance that *dishu* can be interpreted as an alternative calligraphic expression which brings forth non-conventional characteristics.

If the subject of living aesthetics involves a return to the ordinariness and multi-sensorial experiences of everyday life (Saito 2007; Wang 2014) and a departure from labour, modernity, and the urban spectacle (Haapala 2005; Lefebvre 1971, 1991), then water calligraphy can also be

deemed as a significant case of living aesthetics. Maintaining Saito's formalisation of living aesthetics and my observations in Changsha, Guiyang and Chongqing, *dishu* provides aesthetic encounters that are accessible to everyone; it privileges the kinetic and bodily experience alongside the visual; moreover, it can encourage the audience's active participation and imagination. Despite the inevitable party-state's instrumentalization, I conclude that *dishu* allows the retirees observed in my study to express themselves through a familiar means and regain agency over an everyday that is increasingly spectacular, fast, and individual. Last, I posit that water calligraphy has the potential to contribute to shaping a new aesthetic paradigm that favours familiarity, mixed temporalities, and the *living* in a non-western context.

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