

Writing in Water, or, Evanescence, Enchantment and Ethnography in a Chinese Urban Park

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This article reflects upon my experience of filmmaking in a public park in Beijing where I learned to write Chinese calligraphy in water. The essay is committed to the idea that people simultaneously produce persons and worlds in practices that result in the material mediations within which those selves are entangled, and also powerfully engage the environment. Thus, the film features aesthetics that form through the embodiment of a certain kind of politics. It emerged in performance but now exists as an artifact, an example of what philosopher Jane Bennett calls “enchanted materialism.” By combining moments of liveness and objectification, it mimics, in a small way, the production of the social itself. Ethnography, I argue here, should account for as much of this dialectical process as it can. [calligraphy, China, documentary, embodiment, enchantment, performance, writing]

Introduction

A small group of retirees meets every morning for several hours to practice calligraphy on the plaza of a park in Beijing, using long-handled, sponge-tipped brushes dipped in water.¹ They call this *dishu* or “writing on the ground,” and people do it in nearly every city park in China. Their activity 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. I studied in the park intermittently for four years (from 2006 to 2009). As I practiced writing, I was often approached by friendly passersby who slowed down, loitered, and then whispered in my ear: “But this is not art, you know!” Engaging these advisors in conversation, I found they were a varied lot: some accomplished calligraphers themselves, but most just folks who know their stereotypes.

Were they referring to the calligraphy itself? Did it count as art only if it was in ink, not water? Or were the writers’ skills irredeemably amateur? But wasn’t calligraphy historically supposed to be amateur? Or was it a different aspersions altogether: What if these people were too unimportant, being retired, out of work, shelved in the face of the needs of the New China and its get-rich

economic imperatives, so that what they did, *no matter what it was*, could have no significance?

Their murmured critique gave me a point of entry for shaping a film as a way of exploring those questions. Looking past the abstract, classificatory problem of “art” per se, I would try to convey the relationship of people and their calligraphies. It would be a concatenation of bodies, hands, brushes, water, ink, pavement, noise, and yet somehow convey through these materialities the most satisfying things of all, things less tangible, like friendship and the joy born of sociality (Figure 1). A film could be the most beautiful and effective way to convey something of how such gatherings in a park could perform a sense of self and public space simultaneously, as part of my wider ethnography of those processes in Beijing.

In this essay, I will mull over the value of video shooting as *part* of ethnography, as well as the place of a finished film *as* ethnography and discuss some of the choices I made in approaching the calligraphic scene’s material, shooting, and editing it from 2006 to 2011. Those choices turned out to be as often informed by my experience of Chinese thinking and practice as they were by the scholarly theoretical orientations that I brought with me from foreign parts as I returned to the scene of learning. In fact, my fieldwork soon tilted



FIGURE 1. Wang Tongxing writing in water on a sunny morning.

toward emphasizing participation over observation—in a way that, in turn, reminded me of Janelle Taylor's call to reconsider the grounds for the production of anthropological knowledge. She divides making ethnography (the process of performing fieldwork) from making anthropology (the professionalization and inevitable objectification of the results of fieldwork), describing “practice as materializing . . . to emphasize that not only ideas but also material realities, including bodies, are in fact made and continually remade through practice” (Taylor 2005:742, 744). A genuine engagement with practice-as-the-focus meant that, rather than assuming in advance what I would be filming and thus (again Taylor) “producing the anthropology of any particular object that pre-exists ethnography,” my camera and I became integrated into the park scene in unforeseen and ongoing ways. There slowly emerged in my dual activity of filming and calligraphy what Taylor calls “the work of exploring ethnographically how objects precipitated out of practices and processes that are at once social, material and representative” (Taylor 2005:742).

One of the objects that “precipitated” was my first documentary film, *Writing in Water*. Thus, although I made filmmaking choices along the way, only some were conscious, because “the film,” for a long time, existed in fragments of footage, through plans with others, and as an immense, cluttered imaginary space

within me. It emerged in performance and now exists as an artifact. In that sense, as an (albeit specialized) aspect of social life, my fieldwork mimicked the work of the production of the social itself; that is, it combined ongoing moments of liveness and objectification. It seems to me that ethnography should account for as much of this total dialectical process as it can, even if it is inevitably partial. In the wake of much collaborative effort, I can finally turn to creating anthropological text about *the film* and *the process that produced it*, taking responsibility for fieldwork and editing choices in a new way.² (Insofar as I discern them in the rearview mirror as time drives me and the project forward.) I begin with the very first text produced about the film, its current festival application blurb:

Writing in Water

“A film on the social life of calligraphy”

What does it mean to take up calligraphy in a fast-moving world where people often no longer recall the stroke order of unusual words, but can look them up on cellphones? How does it feel being alone, together, spending long hours training your body to write while slowly mulling over your life with others? Writing in Water follows two generations of calligraphy teachers through the eyes of an American who learned to write with them, in Tuanjiehu Park, Beijing, where they practice writing on the plaza everyday. With their students they connect past to present, master to pupil, friend to friend, making a community, making Chinese characters that slowly materialize, and that last long after the water has evanesced into air.

We encounter directly the funny, philosophically inclined teachers and the community of students, people who have been retired, left behind by China's get-rich quick reforms. We see them together in the park and alone at home. But the film's experimental structure interweaves these scenes through the slow materialization of the writing itself, from water, through ink on paper to the most permanent forms of art mounted on silk and worthy of gift-giving or

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sale. It poses the question of where cultural tradition takes shape and where it acquires value, in the writing hand or on the thin, crackling paper in ink. (In Chinese with English subtitles)

I was surprised, once I could “see” it—and see below for the uses of surprise in social analysis—at how deeply informed the final cut of the film was by the way I have come to theorize culture. But first, a word about the fieldwork when this film was shot.

Several problems presented themselves to me immediately when I started to shape my fieldwork in 2006: My interests in China have always been in Han culture, and I added to that a fascination with urban life. This puts me squarely outside Chinese national anthropology, which has emphasized the non-Han minorities and the non-urban peasantry. I wanted to craft a project that could tell us something about the new cities after reform. I did not want to work in, or shoot in, an existing institution.³

I noticed some areas of urban social activity occurring in ways that are relatively openly available to participants and not *fundamentally* organized by the state, family obligations, or new commodified forms of work and consumption. Besides parks, there are bars, clubs, galleries and artists’ studios, Christian meetings in people’s homes, as well as the places where independent film is made and screened.⁴ All these spaces have flourished only after the economic reforms of the early 1980s, after the close of the Cultural Revolution. Later I came upon the work of sociologist Ray Oldenburg on what he called “third places,” exactly the sorts of spaces I was curious about, places where people could show up voluntarily, under their own steam, and forge particular sorts of social ties of friendship (Oldenburg 1982, 1989).

Not to say that the state itself does not seek to “participate” in these modes of self-organization. It does, and through a combination of carrot-and-stick policies. In the case of religion, this is done through regulation, funding of aboveground churches, and outright arrest of members of certain “house churches.”⁵ In the avant-garde art scene, it happens through art education and the museum system and now through municipal building of “artist” villages. This real estate development drives artists out of enclaves they themselves have claimed, and recently it has been coupled with outright arrest of politically critical artists.⁶ Independent documentary filmmaking itself maintains a complex relation to the state. On the one hand, films are made by people who go through state-funded film schools and work for state media—doing their “independent” work on the side. On the other hand, filmmak-

ers avoid the state distribution system and its film board censors by not seeking distribution, while independent festivals and screenings are often subject to closure.

Aesthetics, Politics, and the Performative

“The ethics become buried in the style.” (Vaughan 1999:60)

I remember my first awestruck glimpse of the quick, smooth strokes propelled by a graceful body moving surely over the blank pavement, darkening it just like ink, the characters left behind to dry and slowly disappear in the warm morning air (Figure 2). The metaphor of the “evanescence” of the writing as its “water-as-ink” evaporated, only to be rewritten, inspired my own concept of “recurring sociality”: the ability of people to form assemblies that literally “come and go,” while forging communities of personal significance under the stressful pressures of rapid change.⁷ In this case, communities form around the “personal” voluntarism of the hobbyist, and in the park one finds singing, dancing, meditation, besides the practice of calligraphy.⁸ “Recurring sociality” emphasizes the agency and imagination people muster under the duress of the massive demolition and rebuilding of the city after the Reforms began in the early 1980s.⁹ It provides a framework for helping us to understand the several locations in which people gather and disperse regularly to seek significance in the post-Maoist, post-Socialist city.

Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea of *Relational Aesthetics* opens art practices up to ethnographic understanding and resonated with my work in the park. He discusses



FIGURE 2. Teachers Wang, in yellow, next to Liu in white, with several other students on the plaza of Tuanjiehu Park.

“the sphere of human relations as artwork venue,” which considers “inter-subjectivity and interaction as . . . a point of departure and as an outcome” (Bourriaud 1998:44). It is my hope that such an approach—openly networked and emphasizing such interstitial spaces—can provide a more supple, less institutionalized arena for grasping new senses of personhood taking shape, in part, through the revival of Chinese traditional cultural practices occurring under hard conditions of state-enforced commodification and gentrification (see Chen et al. 2001; Farquhar 2009; Farquhar and Zhang 2005; Visser 2004). In a sense, I am inverting Bourriaud’s formula and taking the sites of art making as a sphere of human relations, thus joining a long tradition of anthropology of art (see Myers 2002 and many others).¹⁰

Bourriaud picks up on a tradition of reflexive sociology such as that found in a recent essay by Law and Urry (2004:394). They propose that research methods themselves are performative; that is, they have an impact on the world within which they are conducted because the human world is “relational,” and, I would add, the analyst is part of that world. In what is a typical move in post-structuralist theory critical of post-enlightenment positivist objectivism, they note that methods become part of the world’s production and are not simply a commentary or description of an already present reality. This amounts to an epistemological transformation in our understanding of the possibilities for the production of knowledge, and, interestingly, Bill Nichols had even earlier marked this attitude in documentary with the same designation of “performative.” He notes that this style marks a shift from “the referential as a dominant feature” and that

one implication of this shift is the possibility of giving figuration to a social subjectivity that joins the abstract to the concrete, the general to the particular, the individual to the collective and the political to the personal in a dialectical, transformative mode. [Nichols 1994:94]

Choosing a public place for fieldwork meant that I did not control or even know in advance who would show up or what would happen. Rather, I became myself part of a scene that unfolded over time, and slowly followed the networks that crisscrossed through that space. Video became a way to engage the sensory and emotional aspects of calligraphy to create what David MacDougall calls the “second anthropology” of the “more intimate structures of culture” (1998:62).¹¹ It further resonated with Chinese indie filmmakers’ com-

mitment to *xianchang*, or being “on the scene” (Robinson 2010; Sniadecki, this volume; Zhang Zhen 2007).

This brings me to another area of engagement most crucial to my filmmaking, Chinese independent documentary.¹² The independent scene has cultivated a kind of gritty sensibility that has somewhat fetishized a kitchen-sink aesthetic of low-light grainy footage, handheld unsteadiness, and a reticence on the filmmaker’s part to have any interaction with subjects. This “direct cinema” style has captivated audiences abroad, who find it charmingly retro and see it as perfectly suited to a documentary movement that emphasizes the marginal, the dispossessed and forms of social life that do not find visibility in state media of any sort. In the absence of much self-reflexivity, the filmmakers themselves are interpolated as having much more in common with their subjects than is usually the case. But it really represents more than a reinvigoration of styles from our own documentary pasts. Indeed, their “direct cinema” reticence that deliberately seeks to erase overt signs of their agency in favor of “pro-filmic” truth has been a key enabler in their media activism.¹³ That activism opens the underbelly of the Chinese economic “miracle” to the gaze of the camera, pursuing a kind of obvious politics of intervention, legible as such to audiences at home and abroad.

I intersect with their agenda in two places: choice of subject(s) and point of view. As subjects of documentary, retirees are not a hot topic—they are overly everyday and utterly ubiquitous. They conflate the private with the public when they spend their days and evenings together in parks.¹⁴ Indie documentary has emphasized politics as public, often uncovering the hidden activities of state corruption for a public archive. Unfortunately, when I described this project to Chinese filmmakers, I must admit some eyes glazed over, particularly among the younger practitioners of an aggressively engaged style of documentary bordering upon exposé. Yet speaking as a curator, I must say that we find a dearth of people shooting about everyday life in any urban locations, which breaks my anthropologist’s heart. The closest thing I have found to my own film is Ning Ying’s wonderful *For Fun* (*Zhaole* 1993), a fiction feature about a gang of old guys doing Beijing Opera in the neighborhood.

The problem of subject and point of view meet in the choice to embed myself and my camera in an aspect of everyday life. This commitment takes us in a very different direction from the Chinese independent documentary of exposé, which is based on a model of communication as denotation, and into the realm of connotation instead. As MacDougall puts it:

One consequence of post-structuralist film theory and the rethinking of representation in anthropology has been to shift our attention from denotation to connotation. Films . . . are less often conceived in the terms of communications theory but rather as a process of constructing new realities. Works become sites of meaning-potential rather than sets of meanings sent and received, or the outside world seen through representations. [MacDougall 1998: 77]

Binding myself as a filmmaker into relations with one refraction of the daily life of my subjects is the pursuit of politics by other means. The film is self-consciously pretty, but in the service, I hope, of moving the thinking about aesthetics beyond beauty.¹⁵ In fact, here aesthetics is formed *through* the embodiment of a certain kind of politics. These writers in water are less about putting their bodies into state spaces, and more about creating those spaces for habitation in the midst of the state¹⁶ (Figure 3). There they create a series of “character portraits,” to pun on the people’s relationship to the words they produce in the sociality of writing together.¹⁷

No politics is possible without the engendering of personhood and the pleasures of identity and thus subjectivity and agency. Human beings simultaneously produce persons and worlds in complex, timely practices that result in the material mediations within which those selves are entangled and also powerfully engage the environment. The philosopher Jane Bennett has written on what she calls “enchanted materialism”: human beings cannot live easily in a modernity “disenchanted” in Weber’s sense because it does not call



FIGURE 3. The students clustering around Liu, who is looking over ink-written homework.

forth enough attachment to result in ethical responsibility. Instead, she proposes we change our stance and notice that the world, especially through sheer complexity, remains fresh with moments of “enchantment.” I quote her at length because her book clarified for me several aspects of making this film:

The mood I call enchantment is provoked by surprise, by an encounter with something one did not expect. Surprise itself includes both a pleasant and charming feeling and a slightly off-putting sense of having been disrupted or tripped up. In enchantment, these two are present in just the right measures so as to combine, fortuitously, in a way that engenders an energizing feeling of fullness or plenitude—a momentary return to childhood *joie de vivre*. Enchantment begins with the step-back immobilization of surprise but ends with a mobilizing rush as if an electric charge had coursed through space to you. In enchantment, a new circuit of intensity forms between material bodies. [Bennett 2001:104]

Bennett, like others today interested in turning to “affect,” wants to understand what may be missing from social analytics cooked up in the kitchen of Reason.¹⁸ I found that making a film celebrating the joyful production instantiated by Mr. Wang, Mr. Liu, and their students could offer a counter to the general sense of retirees’ loss of status and power in post-reform Beijing. Farquhar (2009:569–570) likewise mentions that the retirees are present, outdoors, in your face: singing loudly, dancing about, and filling pavement with beautiful characters. She asks, “What historically particular problems are addressed by this kind of leisurely and legal mobility in public?” (Farquhar 2009:556). I ask: What historically contingent kinds of selves are being produced through writing-as-becoming? We agree that rumors of their uselessness are greatly exaggerated.

Of course, you will say to me, you are “enchanted” by the Chinese calligraphy in the park. Go on YouTube and find all the home movies by foreigners attesting to the general sense of “enchantment.” And then? A delicate matter arises: *In the world of aggressively interventionist, heroic Chinese independent documentary, what place exactly is there for a foreign maker? What engagement with a critical politics is possible?* Even the locals are criticized constantly for airing dirty laundry abroad and excoriated for pandering to a foreign audience imagined as wishing to think ill of the Chinese nation and people. Not only what sort of film could I make, but

how I should appear in its context became an issue for discussion. Chinese filmmaking friends felt that I should star in it. I disagreed.

For better or worse, I was enchanted. The question I will try to take up in the rest of this essay is *how, and whether or not, a documentary film can participate in this enchanting materialism, and what contribution can it make to ethnography?*

The Companionate Camera and Cosmology

“Performative documentary attempts to reorient us—affectively, subjectively—toward the historical poetic world it brings into being.” (Nichols 1994: 99).

This film is shot with what I would call the “companionate camera.” Mostly, I hung out. It is an inductive work—while doing fieldwork, I kept the camera near. We all got used to its presence, a simple matter these days when my subjects had cameras too, cameras on which they often asked my advice.

For me, the heart of the film is Wang’s taiji chuan in the “Body” scene (Figure 4). We were just hanging out, and he burst into this performance that conveyed for me something key to calligraphic aesthetics and their relation to the embodied person. Traditional critics often likened characters to the human body. Thus, characters had bone and muscle, ink was like blood, and blood is the *qi*—or energetic essence—of human beings. But the characters are not only metaphors for the body. They literally emerge from the person wielding the brush—the ink-water-*qi*-blood that comes from the tip of the brush is a contiguous, metonymical extension of



FIGURE 4. Wang’s taiji chuan, the body as a brush.



FIGURE 5. Wang demonstrating the first dot, whose five strokes contain every movement needed by the wrist through the brush.

the embodied, writing self (Billeter 1991; Hay 1983). The tradition of calligraphy is closely entwined with the protocols of *li* (often loosely translated as “ritual”). I have previously written about *li* as a discourse in 18th-century imperial ritual:

Material and thoughtful life are produced simultaneously: Within any social formation, the relationships between words and things, and the practices whereby those conventions are instituted, imply subjectivities who will understand and “find” themselves through those practices. . . . Sociologist Paul Connerton proposes that societies remember in two ways: through inscription and through incorporation. The former stores information for retrieval in external sources, the latter in the sedimented practices of bodily disposition and gesture. [Zito 1997:57–58]

Thus, in the film, calligraphic practice itself took on the status of “role”—how could writing be incorporated in such a way that the audience could appreciate its importance in providing the site where “inscription and incorporation were organized in ways that interpenetrated and complicated their relationship” (Zito 1997:58)? Fittingly, not only did I face representational and metaphorical issues about calligraphy, but also I was undergoing incorporative reorganization myself as I learned.

Calligraphy is quite difficult to master, and I have studied off and on for decades. With Wang, I spent nearly two weeks mastering the first dot—he maintained that every sort of hand-brush movement is miniaturized in the first dot (Figure 5). I think he is right.

Once I learned the twisting wrist movements that resulted in just the right amount of pressure and drag on the brush to make “the first dot,” we were off into months of daily practice. Slowly, my calligraphy training influenced my shooting. When I was writing, I was not shooting, so the brush and the camera came to alternate in my hand. When I was shooting others writing, I think I continued the systematic ways of breathing for writing that I developed in my own practice sessions. I would sync my breath with the writer’s, and film in a rhythm. Having been approached by several filmmaker friends who wanted to shoot me writing—and agreeing to allow three of them—I can attest that shooting calligraphy is not as easy as it looks. Only one of them was any good at it at all, and he was the cinematographer, Yu Jun, who filmed two sections of the film for me.

In Wang’s hilarious and joyful enactment of the body *as* a brush, he provided a glimpse of the magic of calligraphy in a very old sense. That sense is the instantiation of the older Han dynasty-theorized interpenetrating correlative cosmos, where things, people, and their signs commingle and mutually engage one another to produce a lively sense of self in connection with the world. The teaching and practice of both Wang and Liu is founded in the systematic attention to venerable sources in calligraphy aesthetics, as was made evident in conversation and reading mentioned to me. The intertitles present philosophy from very old texts passed to me by Wang, and the words link Wang and Liu to the long past of calligraphic mastery (Jiang Kui 1208; Qia Yunhe 2007; Qianli 687) (Figure 6). They also connect me to Wang as my teacher in the present. They remind

the audience that they are indeed watching something more than physical fitness exercises.

A Sense of the Real, Surprise, and the Pleasures of Beginning Again

“*Film is about something, whereas reality is not.*”
(Vaughan 1999:21)

The film is structured as vignettes separated by stark black intertitles. In retrospect, I can say that this structure served me—as documentary—in at least two ways. My current favorite definition of “documentary” is Dai Vaughan’s, which takes it not as an object but as a response: “Stated at its simplest, the documentary response is one in which the image is perceived as signifying what it appears to record. . . . To make a documentary is therefore to persuade the viewer that what appears to be *is*” (Vaughan 1999:58–59). For him, immediately upon its creation, film began a doubled existence as both record *and* language, which makes us, makers or viewers, always suspended upon the connection between the two possibilities.

Scholar Paola Voci (2004:103, emphasis added) says, “*Authenticity* is better described as the subjective *striving to achieve* truthful representations of reality than the objective claim of capturing and explaining the only true meaning of reality.” I agree and take “authenticity” to mean the documentary’s ability to persuade people of the importance of what they are seeing/hearing, to the point that they might change their minds or take action based upon their engagement. Or, as Sarah Elder (1995) puts it, respond to the empathy created by documentary.

Like Vaughan and Voci, I tend to a human-centered, constructed sense of the real—one that depends deeply upon agency, feeling, and affect. In other words, I hope my viewers will feel an enchanted emotional connection with the writing and writers in the film, not that they will learn information about calligraphy. The film is more mesmerization than education. Through its image language, and its text language, I hope it will intensify a sense of some alter-reality while it is viewed.

One fundament of non-modern Chinese visual aesthetics has been *xieyi*: “to draw (literally ‘write’) the meaning” of a scene rather than depicting the world according to European post-Renaissance canons of ocular realism, including perspective. This sort of painting is done only with ink on paper; rarely is color introduced. When moderns think of “Chinese painting,” this is what they think of—dashing, quick strokes that give an impression of mountains, rocks, rivers, tiny



FIGURE 6. The intertitle before the “Body” scene, taken, as they all were, from manuals given to me by Mr. Wang.



FIGURE 7. Liu's virtuoso performance of large running-style characters in water.

people—unfinished, full of the traces of the energy of the hand that writes. The term “calligraphic” rises to mind because it is the same ink, the same style of brushes. Beautiful grass, or running-style calligraphy, is in fact very picturesque and often quite unintelligible to even well-schooled Chinese eyes. It might as well be a landscape. Both painting and writing in the *xieyi* style convey a reality, but the reality is an intersubjective one—from my heart-mind to yours, via my hand and the ink through your eyes. You should feel transported to the scene; feel my feelings, the very ones I had when I painted. *Xieyi* work is quick, done in an indelible, unforgiving medium, and there are no “mistakes” in any work that another person sees. Artists typically have done so much training, filled so many pages of slightly off, somewhat unsuccessful, or just plain bad painting, that they have internalized a process that is as automatic as habit memory. Any painter anywhere accomplishes this. What singles out the Chinese is the propensity to then celebrate this mastery by public performances, on-the-scene demonstrations of painting and writing as embodied virtuosity (Figure 7).

On the other hand, because the scenes between the intertitles are filmed in a *cinéma vérité* style, in handheld long takes, often lightly edited, I hope that the sense of the “historical process” in the real, pro-filmic world remains to be held in the viewer’s mind. The sense of the sheer amount of daily practice should convey the hard materiality of writing—mastering the brush, understanding liquid flow, knowing about kinds of paper—all these things are not imaginary, nor are they simply symbolic vehicles. They are closer to those nuggets of “the real,” of what Nichols calls “uncontrolled historical process” (Nichols 1994:124), that like-

wise contribute to the sense of authenticity that I consider the sine qua non of “documentary.” They are imbued through practice with formal significance as part of a bodily assemblage (Figure 8).

If *Writing in Water* informs about calligraphy, it is about its process of instilling a somatic enculturation that literally requires those things of the material world, a process that yields, by the end, “works” or *zuopin*. The philosophical messages in the intertitles comment upon that very process, which is a kind of plotline in the film that stars writing itself, in the process of becoming itself.

Let me loop back, once again, to the intertitles, to something else they do in helping me deliver “the real,” as I have defined it for our purposes here, as an intensification of affect. How can that actually be achieved? One way I think works well is the effect of surprise. Like anything that links, the intertitles also interrupt. As black space, they halt the flow of the film, forcing a pause—is it long enough? is it ever long enough?—in the buildup of the narrative goings-on. The vignettes are effectively walled off from one another; we must pause and wait for the next one. There is a suspension of action, and we really do not know what the next scene will bring. Because the vignettes are *vérité*-style, without voice-over, and my presence only leaks in slowly, the blackouts remind us of the artificial nature of the filmic experience and indicate the presence of the editing hand in a way analogous to the camera-holding hand in the shots. The film is both *about* Chinese embodied knowledge and performs my own stance as participant in that embodiment within the film, as its maker.



FIGURE 8. Liu correcting ink-written practice sheets publicly in the park.

Yet in filmmaking, as in so many other things in life, surprise and contingency can bring a refreshing sense of “reality.” Dai Vaughan opens his wonderful *For Documentary: Twelve Essays* with an account of a spontaneous moment in a Lumière short, *A Boat Leaving Harbour*, in which waves suddenly threaten the boat and men must row strenuously against the water:

and by responding to the challenge of the spontaneous moment, they become integrated into its spontaneity. The unpredictable has not only emerged from the background to occupy the greater proportion of the frame; it has taken sway over the protagonists. But such an invasion of the spontaneous into the human arts, being unprecedented, must have assumed the character of a threat . . . to the whole idea of controlled, willed, obedient communication. [Vaughan 1999:5–6]

Of course, Vaughan points out that although the Lumières immediately succeed in “the harnessing of spontaneity” (1999:7), this tickle of the photographically live haunts forever any filmic form, whether labeled “fiction” or “documentary.” That kind of *spontaneity* occurs in the pro-filmic, but one can also construct opportunities for *surprise* in editing. Maybe I am speaking from the point of view of an overscheduled New Yorker, who lives an overplanned life. I long to relinquish agency, and when I am surprised, I feel the rush of enchantment that Bennett associates with a deep sense of the real. She says: “Such moments can be cultivated and intensified by artful means. Enchantment . . . is an uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity” (Bennett 2001:10). Deliberately putting the audience “in the dark,” so that the film can begin again, perhaps creates this.

The rhythm of ending and beginning again also mimicked the flow of both the space and time of the social scene in the park. Chinese intellectuals, artists, and policy makers seem to be very interested in the sense of *gonggong kongjian* or “public space.” I’ve been thinking about it through a Durkheimian lens, his idea of the “sacred” as appearing with the excited collective effervescence of people gathered together. Durkheim famously contrasted this flourishing with the humdrum routine of everyday life. This project helps us to understand how the seeking for significance through activities that allow people to transmute time-spent into forms of social and personal value also simultaneously creates public space as they take up new activities together.

Calligraphy in the park, written in water and in public, is an extension of something that every literate Chinese person does every day of their lives: writing.

When it is done with the big broomhandled brush, it is also a *gongfu*, or a *yangsheng* (life cultivation) practice. Such practices entail a politics, whether they seem to or not: the art and politics of the everyday. There is a delicate dialectic of temporal construction of the distinction between home practice and park practice, mediated by the writing itself.

The writing appears different in its different phases: in the park, at the height of sociability, written in water on hot pavement, it evanesces, disappears, and is written again and again in the same space. When people leave the park, they bear nothing with them but their brushes, and a more skillful soma: a better-tuned hand/heart-mind. As Wang says: “You aren’t writing well because your hand and your heart/mind have not synched up yet!”

But at home, they take up the small hairy brush and use ink to practice (Figure 9). This practice-work is less ephemeral than the writing in water, but also less permanent than calligraphy produced for permanent encscrollment and display. It is done on thin rice paper and for the purpose of bringing it to the park and giving it to the teacher for his correction—in public in front of other students. Sometimes, beautiful writing produced at home by teachers is captured in ink on paper and presented, again in the park, to students. In each case, the brush drops into liquid, rises, falls upon the surface, and leaves its mark, only to rise again: suspension followed by configuration, only to repeat.

Let us think about evanescence and effervescence, and how such things are productively reified, objectified, and thus captured and harnessed. How personhood is worked upon, built and lived in times of intense change. What about the embodied self that walks away from the built park space of the calligraphic encounter with



FIGURE 9. Wang at home, practicing in ink.

others? Is this a way of creating individualized skill, completely in line with the urban emphasis upon the neoliberal Individual?¹⁹ Or is this psyche-soma also a kind of portable “sacred space” that carries within itself the possibility of enjoying and unfolding moments and spaces of enchantment? What role does the mediation through the teacher play? Not everyone in the park “studies” with a teacher, but many people are drawn into the community that is formed around the teachers Wang and Liu in subtle ways. The writing person remains the linchpin, providing carnal continuity through the days of slowly improving handwriting and slowly evolving relationships that come to require the openness of the park to flourish. An evanescent effervescence whose chant of “*Mingtian jian!*” “See you tomorrow!” carries the promise of beginning again, a promise that, given the pressures of enforced urban change, can seem quite heroic.

Notes

- ¹ Thanks to Maris Gillette for organizing Forbidden No More: The New China in Ethnographic Film, Haverford College, February 24–26, 2012, where the film was screened and this article presented in first draft (<http://www.haverford.edu/forbiddenmore/>). Thanks as well to the wonderful participants. “Unification Lake Park” (in Chinese Tuanjiehu) anchors the community, which is designated as an administrative unit called the *shequ* and is one of the first of “new-Beijing” communities built after the Reforms of the early 1980s. (The park’s opening coincides with this restructuring.)
- ² Several other “objects” were collaboratively created during this fieldwork, among them the portrait photographic installation *Dogs and People*, made in the neighborhood of Tuanjiehu, and the *Stiletto Project*, a collaborative performance with model Chen Juanhong done during an art residency with Redgate Gallery.
- ³ Urban anthropology of China grows, and I join a group of people interested in urban ethnography in a variety of settings (Chen 2003; Chen et al. 2001; Davis et al. 1995; Farquhar 2002, 2009; Farquhar and Zhang 2005, 2012; Rofel 2007; Smart and Zhang 2006; Zhang Li 2002, 2010).
- ⁴ See the work by Andrew Jones (1992) and Lisa Rofel (2007) on clubs, and by Jianbo Huang (2007) on forms of spirituality available to migrant workers in Chinese cities.
- ⁵ On Protestant Christianity in China, see Yiwu Liao (2011), Kindopp and Hamrin (2004), Xin (2009), and He Zhe (2009). See also the exile-produced documentary *The Cross: Jesus in China* (2004).
- ⁶ See the documentary *Never Sorry* (2011) on artist Ai Weiwei and two films by Zheng Kuo on artists’ struggle to maintain their studios against corrupt destruction: *798 Station* (2010) and *Cold Winter* (2011).
- ⁷ At first, I called this “ephemeral sociality.” But while “ephemeral” describes the writing beautifully, used directly about social life it seems better applied to flash mobs and more political guerilla urban protest techniques. The concept needed more density and to be metaphorized before it worked for thinking about the social life of the park writers in the film. For example, OWS seems to display a process where “ephemerality” becomes “recurring,” then in turn becoming “occupying.” See the brilliant essay by Simmel and Hughes (1949) on the sociology of sociality.
- ⁸ Judith Farquhar’s long-term project on *yangsheng* or “nurturing life” activities in Beijing has provided the term “park practice.” See her article “The Park Pass: Peopling and Civilizing a New Old Beijing” for a thoughtful history of park spaces and a brilliant discussion of the politics of quotidian activities engaged there (Farquhar 2009:558). See also Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang (2012).
- ⁹ Many independent documentaries have taken up the problem of unfair displacement and heartbreaking loss of homes to urban development. A classic is *Meishi Street* by Ou Ning (1992) and more recently *Demolition/Chaiqian* by J.P. Sniadecki (2006).
- ¹⁰ Bourriaud has been roundly criticized for producing an account of art that too easily conflates older forms of installation with the public space of museums or commercial galleries themselves—and that collapses any possibility of art-as-critical of its milieu. But his work nonetheless provides one arena of overlap for anthropologies of social production and art practices per se. In a significant move, Claire Bishop (2004) replaces relational “aesthetics” with relational “antagonisms” as she mounts a critique of Bourriaud based on Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) post-Marxist classic *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
- ¹¹ Fourteen years ago, he contrasted this with the “first anthropology of culture viewed as ordered, limiting and pervasive.” He notes that the “second anthropology” of agency, subjectivity, and the emotion of the felt world might lay the grounds for a future visual anthropology (MacDougall 1998:62). I would venture that that era is upon us!
- ¹² I have curated, with Zhang Zhen, a small biennial film festival of these works at New York University since 2006. *Reel China: 6th Documentary Biennial* was held in October 2012, and the most recent one was held in March 2014.
- ¹³ See Zito (in press) for more on the “direct cinema” question.
- ¹⁴ Farquhar’s (2009:554–555) essay is eloquent on this point: In retirees’ park activities, “the personal is made public: the most natural and simple pleasures claim, en masse, the city’s space and time and give it cultural form. . . . To understand the daily enjoyments of ordinary city residents as a continuation of China’s revolutionary century . . . is to acknowledge the voices and the public activism of many forms of political communication usually ignored, or even denounced as passive.”

- ¹⁵ If we find an ambivalence within visual anthropology itself to the production of beautiful things, it may be because of the effort from the start to differentiate ethnographic film as scientific record from the growing attraction of cinema as entertainment (El Guindi 1998). Of course, in the 1950s, Jean Rouch famously disrupted this effort as he introduced the participatory camera. Much influenced by him, Faye Ginsburg introduced the idea of “embedded aesthetics” as a better descriptor for Aboriginal theories of media-making (Ginsburg 1995). “Beauty” becomes one stop along the processual way to expressive artifaction in my thinking along similar lines.
- ¹⁶ My thanks to Jess Shipley for his comments on the film and an earlier draft of this article at the workshop “Forbidden No More” at Haverford College, February 2012.
- ¹⁷ In English, and in this article, Chinese written words are called “characters.”
- ¹⁸ See Gatens (1995), Sedgewick (2003), and Gregg and Seigworth (2010), among many contributions.
- ¹⁹ For discussion of neoliberalism in China as an example of a mobile technology of governance, see Ong (2006). For even more emphasis upon its effects as an ideology of personhood, see Rofel (2007) and Anagnost (2004).

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