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Locating vernacular creativity outside the ‘urban cool’ in Beijing: ephemeral water calligraphy

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ABSTRACT

How and where to be creative, and what creativity entails and affords has been subject to momentous change in recent decades in China. Since the early 2000s, the discourse of creativity has played a leading role in governmental policies that aim to boost economic development through a focus on the creative industries. First-tier Chinese cities have reinvented themselves as creative hotbeds with distinctive areas, often located at the fringes of the city, for creative production and practice (Ren and Meng [2012]. Artistic urbanization: creative industries and creative control in Beijing. *International journal of urban and regional research*, 36 (3), 504–521, Power, capital, and artistic freedom: contemporary Chinese art communities and the city. *Cultural studies*, 33 (4), 657–689). This article complicates this creative-city script, one that is deeply enmeshed in a global proliferation of the creativity discourse in tandem with Chinese state policies, by examining the practice of water calligraphy. This is an urban ephemeral creative practice that takes place in public parks in the centre of Beijing. Water calligraphy, done by the elderly in Beijing, challenges the idea of creativity as the domain of a young cool urban class, while its ephemerality contests ideas that urban creativity is necessarily forced into structures of commodification and governmentalization. Water calligraphers’ adherence to the traditional discourse of calligraphy, despite several creative deviations, further challenges notions of creativity that identify it with novelty. Within the urban landscape, these senior citizens carve out a creative space for themselves outside designated art districts and creative industries clusters. In doing so, they disregard the imperative of the new that is conventionally believed to underpin ‘real’ creativity, and thus may help us to rethink the idea of creativity itself.

KEYWORDS Vernacular creativity; the everyday; water calligraphy; creative city; Beijing

A retiree that I meet in a public park in Beijing has just lettered metres of the park’s surface with intricate running script–style calligraphy written in water. ‘We are just having fun!’ he declares, smiling at me. His practice is called *dishu*

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(地书), which translates as 'script of the ground' and in English is often referred to as 'water calligraphy'.¹ Water calligraphers are not alone in the parks: as early as seven o'clock, many groups of retired or middle-aged men and women flock to the park to dance, exercise, sing, make music or meditate. Among them are the ground-writers (*dishuren* 地书人),² or, as I will refer to them, water calligraphers: both men and women using hand-cut brushes made from sponges, foam and broomsticks or umbrella sticks to letter paved areas of the public park with calligraphy in all shapes and sizes, using water instead of ink. It is a striking sight: graceful – but disciplined – synchronized movements of the body and brush create beautiful characters that sparkle in the morning light, or freeze up in the frost, just to disappear again within seconds, or minutes when it is cold. In doing so, the park's grey tile stones transform into sheets of paper over which visitors and water calligraphers discuss the dissolving characters, the calligraphic styles and their content, transforming corners of the park into impermanent poetic places.

This article sets out to analyse this public artistic play in the heart of Beijing as a critical response to the dominant creative-city script that serves as a blueprint for where and how creative production should take place in Beijing. As such, this article allows for a consideration of alternative modes of creative development in the urban context. Since the early 2000s, the discourse of creativity has played a leading role in governmental policy, as the promotion of creative cultural industries is believed to boost economic development (Gu and O'Connor 2006, Keane 2006, de Kloet 2013, Keane and Chen 2017). First-tier Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai have reinvented themselves as creative hotbeds with distinctive areas for creative production and practice, often located on the urban fringes (Ren and Meng 2012, Zielke and Waibel 2014, Cornell 2018, Wang 2018). Art districts specifically, as Wang notes, are now a sought-after urban feature intended to maximize economic potential and upgrade the image of the city (Wang 2018, p. 4).

Richard Florida's work *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) has been influential in conjuring up these urban reconfigurations, by conceptualizing urban areas as places that should attract a young and footloose group of creative workers, the so-called creative class. These urban areas, in turn, have to make it a priority to entice these workers by facilitating the creation of settings that allow for a vibrant city life (Florida 2002, p. 232). Florida's thesis has since its inception been subjected to a variety of critiques: his idea of the 'creative class' focuses too exclusively on a privileged group of people, reinforcing social and class biases (Peck 2005, Menger 2006, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, McRobbie 2016); it does not take into account the precarity that comes with mobility (Chow 2017); and because

Florida's ideas have become so ubiquitous, everything is now termed 'creative', hollowing out the concept and obfuscating what is actually constitutive of creativity (Mould 2018).

These critiques notwithstanding, walking around in downtown Beijing, the streetscapes are filled with exactly the spaces Florida had in mind: cafés, start-ups and hipster joints where self-identified creatives congregate, carrying shiny laptops and drinking green tea lattes. I myself looked like one of these workers, who, after fieldwork in the parks in the morning, hurried to such places for much-needed Wi-Fi and coffee to jot down my fieldnotes. There, the older people I talked to minutes earlier seemed far away, echoing McRobbie's critique of the creative city:

Few urban creative economy writers focus on mothers and children, on grandmothers and older women, on play parks or on local amenities such as swimming pools or public libraries. Old people seem to fade out of view, as do aggressive youths or young teenage mums pushing prams. (2016, p. 157)

The contradiction between the young, seemingly productive and cool creative people whose place in the city is firmly built in to its urban design and the older bodies in the same city who are creative as well but whose creativity is not planned or designed within larger schemes of urban development, and whose creative output is mundane, convivial and temporary, excites and unsettles, and is the point of departure for this analysis. It ties into larger questions: can creativity be unproductive? Are the young more creative? Can moments of ephemeral vernacular creativity be understood as instantiations of invention and transformation? And how does the practice of water calligraphy speak back to the creative-city discourse? Also, what, in all this, does calligraphy, an art practice that has complex relationships with notions of creativity, have to do with it?

This article thus challenges ideas of creative placemaking in the context of Florida's creative city by redirecting the focus on the vernacular and everyday practice of water calligraphy taking place in that same creative city. The public park, I suggest, is an active agent that produces creative moments by transforming into a creative hotbed, invented and maintained by retirees. The 'vernacular' in 'vernacular creativity', most widely understood, refers to a language spoken by 'the people' in everyday life, as opposed to official languages. The term has shifted from denoting daily speech to different areas such as architecture, music and art, describing practices that are somehow done outside these dominant frameworks (Burgess 2007). The vernacular gestures towards a type of creativity that can offer a countertypology to productive and commodifiable types of creativity. Studies of vernacular creativity thus set out to understand the multiplicity of spaces and people where creative ideas and skills are produced and distributed. Vernacular

creativity poses a counterargument to the idea that creativity should be seen (only) as contributing to economic and urban development, and to the idea of creativity as the property of particular individual geniuses. Instead, it honours the non-productive and the non-economic, the marginal, quotidian and socially inclusive. The case of water calligraphy also challenges the imperative of the new that underpins discourses of creativity (Groys 1992). Raymond Williams's famous assertion that 'culture is ordinary' (Williams 1993) is emblematic of studies that exalt the everyday as a space where ordinary practices are seen as creative and are fostered, maintained and thrive, practices that include activities such as everyday photography, scrapbooking, blogging (Burgess 2006, 2007), knitting groups (Platt 2017), cooking (de Certeau 1998) and even romance, banter (Willis 1990) and cleaning and homemaking (Lee 2010).

These studies generate a discursive field of creative production that is not claiming to be located completely outside artistic institutions or commercial popular production, as the boundaries between all these fields are blurry, but that invests in the *ordinariness* of creative everyday life. For this study, I follow Michel de Certeau (1984, 1997), who shows how 'everyday life' can be approached as a field of possibility for a life lived differently. Arguing that our modernity is made up of a range of different temporalities, de Certeau singles out everyday life as an inventive place, where a critique of the dominance of an economic commodity order and the 'rationale governing the present' can take place (de Certeau 1984, Highmore 2002, p. 148). This critique should not be thought of as oppositional to a governing system, but rather as holding potential:

On the one hand, there are slowly developing phenomena, latencies, delays that are piled up in the thick breadth of mentalities, evident things and social ritualizations, an opaque, stubborn life buried in everyday gestures that are at the same time both immediate and millenary. On the other hand, irruptions, deviations, that is, all these margins of an inventiveness from which future generations will successively draw their 'cultivated culture'. (de Certeau 1997, p. 137)

De Certeau thus sets out to find moments of creativity within the everyday that are mundane and, importantly, that are separated from other means of cultural production as they 'deviate' from it, 'poach' from it or 'make do' with it. Consumers show creative inventiveness by their 'ways of operating' within a system that is constructed by someone else. Important for this article, this system refers not only to the current system in which creativity is instrumentalized for urban growth, but also to the system of traditional calligraphy, a highly respected and institutionalized artistic practice that is deeply invested in its own history and enmeshed with governmental power.

The way in which de Certeau separates the everyday from other means of cultural production is not unproblematic in contemporary contexts, as both Burgess (2006) and Miller and McHoul (1998) discuss. Public dissemination of the type of everyday and mundane instances of creativity de Certeau heralds is increasingly ubiquitous and already part of everyday life, they argue, and this is true in the case of water calligraphy too. The practice has since its inception evolved, inserted itself and expanded into spaces outside the park: the practice appears in contemporary art, film, education and (Olympic) propaganda, and mobile-phone video clips of water calligraphy abound online. This complicates the earlier posed hypothesis that water calligraphy is an alternative and quotidian practice operating outside of economically driven forms of creativity and established artistic practice.

The research for this article developed from fieldwork conducted in two parks in Beijing: Ditan Park (*ditan gongyuan* 地坛公园), located in the northern part of the city just outside the second ring road, and Taoranting Park (*Taoranting gongyuan* 陶然亭公园), a larger park in the southwestern part of the city. Ditan Park was, during the fieldwork period, which consisted of eleven months spread over 2015–2018, frequented by a loosely organized group of around fifteen water calligraphers. All of them are retired, ranging in age from fifty-five to eighty and predominantly male. In Taoranting Park we find a similar scene, but here, more water calligraphers write together on a square where a stone has been erected in their name – this park is the centre of the ‘Taoranting Water Calligraphy Association’ and organizes an annual National Contest for Water Calligraphy. In both parks, I wrote water calligraphy alongside the water calligraphers, while talking with them rather than just observing. Most of these talks are not taped and were written down afterwards in fieldnotes. Apart from participant observation, practicing together and informal talks with over forty water calligraphers, I started, inspired by Angela Zito (2014), to document moving images into a mini-documentary³; echoing Zito: ‘my fieldwork mimicked the work of the production of the social itself; that is, it combined ongoing moments of liveness and objectification’ (Zito 2014, p. 9). Using moving images as a research tool, I was able to play and replay the body movements and evaporating calligraphy, and progress from there with analysis after the characters and their writers had left.

In what follows I provide an ethnography of water calligraphy in public parks in Beijing following three interrelated themes that have evolved from the observations made during my fieldwork and point out where de Certeau’s ‘creative deviation’ most revealingly takes place: (1) space: the public park, (2) body: its physical component and (3) time: the affordances of water calligraphy’s ephemerality.



The park as a creative place within the city

Chinese literature on the phenomenon of water calligraphy is relatively scarce, and appears primarily in journals on geriatric health, focusing on the physical benefits the practice is supposed to deliver rather than its (non-)involvement with the calligraphy scene (see, e.g. Chen 2007, Zhang 2007, Li 2011).⁴ Zito asserts similarly that ‘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’ (Zito 2014, p. 1). Yen calls it ‘evanescent calligraphy’: ‘Clearly the purpose is not so much to express creativity through the brush but to strengthen and invigorate the body (*jianshen*) and relax the mind (*yishen*)’ (Yen 2004, p. 112), and Valjakka refers to it as ‘street graffiti’, categorizing the practice under ‘urban art images’ (Valjakka 2016, p. 358). Studies of urban space and public park life in China often omit the practice altogether in their accounts of leisurely activity in the parks, with the exception of Farquhar (2009, Farquhar and Zhang 2012) and Gaubatz (2008), who both identify water calligraphy as a form of exercise in the context of self-nurturing practices (*yangsheng* 养生). And indeed, the body plays a dominant role in the practice, explaining why water calligraphy has not received more rigorous attention from either arts or humanities scholars: its curious mixture of exercise and a vernacular form of ephemeral calligraphy makes the practice an

uneasy fit for either calligraphy criticism or art criticism, or indeed cultural or urban studies.

In the Chinese media, water calligraphy is praised as low-carbon, innocent folk art; health benefits are a bonus.⁵ The practice is increasingly instrumentalized by the national and local governments to cultivate awareness around calligraphy and by extension Chinese culture, and to promote the image of the city as a creative and vibrant place: water calligraphy groups were invited to perform in events surrounding the 2008 Olympic Games, a calligraphic design by a water calligrapher appeared on athletes' uniforms in the 2012 Olympic Games, and water calligraphy delegates are invited to schools to practice with children, in accordance with the government's aim to create a more broad and inclusive understanding of calligraphy.⁶

The practice took shape in the 1980s after the launch of the Reform and Opening-Up Policy in China, and it has spread from the capital of Beijing to parks all over the country. My informant Xue provides me with a narrative of its origin⁷:

As for me, I started to do it in 1992 or 1993. Back then, we did not have a special water calligraphy brush yet. We just used a small wooden rod and attached some sponge to it, we didn't use scissors to shape it, we just tied it up in a bun, and then you can just write. At that time, there were only four or five people writing in Taoranting Park. We are considered one of the early groups.

I present this story of a grassroots and vernacular creative practice starting with a small group of retirees and their humble tools not as a *fait accompli*, but as the dominant narrative of inception – in the parks, in other scenes of calligraphy and in the media. Since its humble beginnings – which some have argued should be understood as taking place thousands of years earlier when people used wooden sticks to write in water – the water calligraphy movement is now rapidly growing. Chastanet (2013) estimated that several million elderly people are writing in parks, and groups of calligraphers can now be found in almost every public park in every large Chinese city. From numerous conversations, it is clear that there is no homogenous profile to be drawn of the people practicing in the parks. Water calligraphers have former occupations ranging from farming and nursing to civil service and professional dancing; what unites them today is their status of retiree, their hobby and their choice of public park. Ms Zhang from Beijing, for example, says:

I did not finish high school, but now I can recite the *Orchid Pavilion*.⁸ Whenever I get the chance, I go. First, they taught me how to write, and now we are all learning from each other. I feel so proud when people are passing by and compliment me on my writing.

She writes out a Tang dynasty poem in regular script when I meet her in Ditan Park, telling me that most women prefer dancing in the park, but that she

likes to learn how to write and doesn't care much for dancing. Next to her writes a retired military veteran who is also from Beijing; he adds:

Here we are all equal. Some of us are from the countryside, some of us used to be professors. Here we are each other's classmate and teacher at the same time.

Most of the water calligraphers I spoke to, unlike Ms Zhang, were taught calligraphy as children. However, as their education coincided with one of China's most tumultuous periods, many of them did not have the opportunity to freely write and further cultivate their skill after primary school because of the various political disruptions and upheavals that culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Their tools are simple: park tiles – which, conveniently, have grid lines similar to those of calligraphy practice sheets – water and brush. The brush is an object of pride, perhaps because it is homemade from leftover materials: a piece of foam is gathered from a discarded sofa and cut in a pointy brush-like shape and the shaft of a mop or umbrella is used as the handle. A plastic water bottle cut in half attaches the handle to the foam tip. In both parks, a few men were known to be good brush makers, and they sell or simply give brushes away. Increasingly, foam brushes are for sale in online shops and park kiosks, but they are for tourists and occasional park visitors; water calligraphers do not use them, preferring to stick to their own homemade brushes. The practice itself is permeated with spatiality and temporality, which applies to this usage of trash as well: it can be understood as a visualization of everyday life in the process of modernization and brings to mind what Highmore called Walter Benjamin's trash aesthetics. For Benjamin, according to Highmore, 'everyday life registers the process of modernization as an incessant accumulation of debris: modernity produces obsolescence as part of its continual demand for the new' (Highmore 2002, p. 61). The repurposing of trash underscores the temporal DIY aesthetics of water calligraphy and illustrates what Michel de Certeau calls a 'making do' with living in a ready-made culture.

Most of my informants stressed the simple fact that one *just needs to do something* after retirement. This 'something' happens for many retirees in China in Beijing's large public parks, morphing every morning into a temporary colourful playground where one is spoilt for choice: groups of female fan dancers, tai chi practitioners, ballroom dancers, kite flyers, crocheters, chess players, mah-jong players, water calligraphy writers and choral singers all convene with their respective groups, creating a whirlwind of sound, movement and colour for a few hours before leaving around lunch time. Although referred to as public parks (*gong yuan* 公园), the parks in Beijing are technically not unrestricted as a small entrance fee is required, with discounts for retirees and students. These types of urban public parks in Beijing have been around since the late Qing dynasty and early Republican era, when the joint efforts of the municipal government and local gentry and merchants transformed imperial and

restricted spaces into civilian ones (Shi 1998). The public park as we know it today is according to Shi a purely Western and modern concept which developed in Europe in the 1830s to stimulate public health during the original heyday of industrialization. For similar reasons of health management, local gentry-merchant organizations in China started building public parks in 1906 (Shi 1998, p. 225). This all halted when first the Japanese invasion and then the establishment of the Communist Party took priority over urban health management, and the parks acquired a utilitarian identity (Padua 2007, p. 66). Neighbourhoods and communities were subsequently placed under the work unit (*danwei* 单位) which had its own socio-spatial configurations and came to control every aspect of an individual's life – there was no space outside the unit for leisure. Wang describes how, even before the Cultural Revolution, the duration, forms and substance of leisure were highly controlled and took place within the *danwei*: 'in the name of "collectivism", it became an unwritten rule that leisure activities should take the form of group action' (Wang 1995, p. 153).

The influence of Maoist propaganda on everyday lives declined in intensity with Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the shift to a market-based economy starting in 1978. The gradual loosening of state control over people's daily existence, combined with an increased standard of living as a result of the flourishing economy, argues Rolandsen, significantly changed the lives of urban Chinese residents; the lifestyle choices people can make today have allowed for park life to re-emerge (Rolandsen 2011, p. 2). Now, large parks in Beijing within the second ring road are very well maintained: they have clean toilets, kiosks, broad paths and well-kept greenery.

This context is essential to understand what happens in the parks today. When Shi calls parks a 'purely Western' concept, it might evoke the idea that the space of the public park in Beijing is experienced, negotiated and appropriated similarly as in 'the West'. This is not the case. First, although there are pockets of tranquillity, the parks are in general not quiet spaces, but loud and eclectic sonic environments. All the different hobby groups come with their own sounds, in the form of transistor radios emitting tinny music, musical instruments and joint voices in the fervently singing choirs. Second, the layout of the parks differs from their Western counterparts. While the parks do have green areas, there are no stretches of grass for sunbathing or picnicking; the green areas have wooden signs that prohibit entry. Consequently, park activity takes place on the pavements and squares, or in the little pavilions dotted around the parks. The parks are walled, and access is possible only through gates. Although I want to steer away from tired East versus West comparisons, I believe these differences in how green urban space is appropriated help to contextualize the urban park as a community-based and noisy, eclectic landscape where, in the mornings, older people come together for *activity* rather than for quiet and more solitary endeavours such as reading, lounging

or napping. Farquhar describes this as a ‘civilization of urban space through everyday customs’ (Farquhar 2009, p. 571).

Chen (2011), in her research on public square dancing,⁹ argues that these groups are creatively adapting urban spaces – parks, parking lots, pavements – for their own needs. As such, *they* – and not urban planners – decide how space is appropriated, rendering them powerful in spaces they have ‘loosened’, per Franck and Stevens: temporarily pried apart from their original purpose by residents with agency (Franck and Stevens 2007, p. 39). Although a tempting narrative to follow, this cannot be applied unproblematically to hobby practices within the park. The original aim of creating public parks was mainly to provide health benefits for a growing urban population, and the groups in the park conform neatly to that purpose, albeit in creative, unexpected and diverse ways.

This historical and socio-spatial context clarifies how parks, as former imperial spaces that still carry residues of ‘poetic flavour’ (Shi 1998, p. 244), now offer the type of entertainment previously enjoyed at temple fairs and serve as a breeding ground for activity today. As for the collectivity of these hobby practices, Farquhar has theorized that the elderly, those pursuing these activities, have spent half their lives in a political climate that was steeped in collective mobilization: ‘the depoliticized but still committed actors in their daily practice act on a political habitus inculcated several decades ago but not yet really forgotten’ (Farquhar 2009, p. 558). She argues that

[t]he inner-city population of Beijing’s aging residents may be on the move just for fun, but we should not forget that this generation, veterans of the continuing revolution of Maoism, [are] experts at making politics out of the personal, and vice versa. Nationalism and the socialist collective are, as it were, in their bones. (Farquhar 2009, p. 554)

The use of public space is thus dependent on how the state decides to allocate it, and not only where people move, but also what they do within that space is tied in to the political climate, as one interviewee stated matter-of-factly:

Society is getting more stable and is improving, otherwise water calligraphy could not become so popular. Xi Jinping is honest and did some very useful things for ordinary people.

The public park, I suggest, is an active agent that helps produce creative expressions by transforming into a creative hotbed of its own right, invented and maintained by retirees. Through an alternative reading of the built space of the park, their vernacular practice brings artistic practice to the city centre and, as I elucidate in the next section, contributes both to personal health and to appreciation of the art of calligraphy.

Body movements and calligraphic lines

When, as an outsider, you observe the amalgam of calligraphic activity in the morning, inevitably, the feeling stirs that you are witnessing a festive occasion, a celebration of social life and of the body. It is important to note that men and women alike take part in the festivities. Traditionally, calligraphy is a gendered practice – once predominantly practiced by the ruling male elite, it became associated with and seen as a practice meant to be done by scholarly men. Today, still, we see more male calligraphers than female, and this goes for water calligraphy as well. Yet on almost every trip to the park I have encountered women who are practicing water calligraphy side by side with men, not thinking too much of it. As women in the parks move so publicly and brazenly in dance or *qigong*, along with writing, they seem to express a liberation of the body. Given the traditional restrictions on women's mobility and literacy in China, this is a crucial observation. The feeling of liberation is, perhaps, amplified because these male and female bodies on the move are *older* bodies: those often perceived as enfeebled and vulnerable suddenly appear freed and empowered.



Traditionally, the skill of calligraphy is largely inculcated through physical discipline: copying brush movements and a meticulously choreographed bodily posture are the only ways to acquire the skill. It is the – alleged –

glaring contradiction that excites here. I have observed calligraphers wielding their large brushes, bending their backs, knees and arms, dancing to the beat of music while writing with two brushes at the same time. These sensuous and non-repressed movements – as opposed to the bodily control demanded in calligraphy class – which result in a new type of calligraphy beg the questions: what (recognizable) poses are assumed? How do the perceived health benefits of calligraphy affect and inform these poses, and is that part of a creative deviation of the norm too? According to Michel Foucault, the body is a floating signifier that can be moulded and disciplined by external discourses of power (Foucault 1975). Do the movements made in water calligraphy similarly induce a kind of discipline, or does this practice, facilitated by the free space of the park, allow for new movements and creative imaginations that deviate from those of traditional calligraphy?

I meet Xue, a retired jade carver, in Taoranting Park. The proud head of the Taoranting Water Calligraphy Association, she tells me:

At first, when you retire, you have a feeling of loss, and don't know how to spend your time. You feel useless, and you don't have any important position in your *danwei* anymore. But now, we all feel different. There are people here with bad health, with a bad back and they ask, can writing cure me? Lower my head and write characters, can it influence my health? And then I say: writing is energy [*qi* 气]. It is using the power of your body. It is 'essence, *qi*, and spirit' [*jing, qi, shen* 精气神].¹⁰ You let your spirit guide your brush. It's like tai chi. The moving your spirit is the exercise.

Many water calligraphers effortlessly mobilized such rhetoric, which, as I understood later, is actually part of their ordinary, everyday speech, grounded in the materiality of this everyday activity. Going to the park and letting 'your spirit guide your brush' is seen as an everyday means to stay healthy. Farquhar and Zhang (2012) describe this as '*yangsheng* [养生] wisdom' in their work on life-nurturing practices in contemporary Beijing (Farquhar and Zhang 2012, p. 122). *Yangsheng* or 'nurturing life' is broadly made up of a range of self-care practices that have become popular among retirees in recent decades, but are deeply embedded in Chinese metaphysics and cosmology. Nurturing life 'hinges almost entirely in the quotidian', as Farquhar and Zhang argue, and includes everyday park activities such as dancing, writing, *qigong* and fan dancing. Even more mundane activities such as eating well, drinking enough, dressing appropriately for the weather, taking walks and being sociable are included in this holistic idea of cultivating the good life. Elsewhere, Farquhar and Zhang (2005) argue that this is closely related to the withdrawal of national support for healthcare associated with the Reform and Opening-Up Policy. The 1990s brought massive growth in health insurance schemes that

proved unaffordable for many. They argue that in this climate the 'aging population is bombarded with state-sponsored public health information and free disease screenings. They have realized that when it comes to their own health, they are "on their own"' (Farquhar and Zhang 2005, p. 320). *Yangsheng* echoes the idea of Foucault's 'art of existence', which he sees as

those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria. (Foucault 1992, 10–11)

Water calligraphy in the park combines several *yangsheng* practices: it moves the body, it trains the brain and it is sociable. *Yangsheng* and vernacular creativity are concepts that both insist on the everyday and of quotidian practices thriving in everyday settings.

Depending on what type of calligraphy is written, the whole arm or the entire upper body is in motion, the back is moving along with the arms and the calligrapher has to walk backwards while they write so as to not stand on their own vertically written characters. Those writing in large grass script, a flowing, fast and for most people illegible type of calligraphy, generally move more than those writing smaller clerical or regular script, and the writing, especially of longer verses, is often interspersed with moments of remoistening the brush, rotating the arms in the air or stretching. The whole body is thus engaged and performs in an ongoing flow of different movements. Berlant has argued that 'the practices of the senses [that] are always working in the now and are active and responsive without being expressive, necessarily, of ideologies, or truths, or anything' (Berlant 2011, p. 202). Hidden in the sensuous and seemingly unrestricted movements of water calligraphers, however, we find an ingrained master narrative of traditional calligraphy that centres explicitly on the disciplined body. Calligraphy theory is traditionally, and famously, permeated with bodily imagery of movement and force, and body parts serve as metaphors to describe the calligraphic line, the energy of the brush and the balanced shape of a character. The somatically anchored practices of the water calligraphers are an important creative interpretation of that bodily aspect of calligraphy, made possible through the space of the park where free movements are fostered and their creative use of trash for tools. What is important to remember, though, is how much these movements are predetermined by the fixed shapes of conventional calligraphy and are as such disciplined by external discourses of the power of traditional calligraphy. In other words: arms bend, feet move

and backs sway to the left and the right with the aim of mimicking the calligraphic shapes made by traditional calligraphy masters.



Ephemeral vernacular writing skills

In conversations on writing skill with water calligraphers, two principles came to the fore that help us understand how the concept of the ephemeral affects this creative practice and what that means for understanding creativity: to ‘practice characters’ (*lianzi* 练字) – with the implication that their writing should not be taken too seriously: it is ‘just for fun’ (*zhi shi wanr* 只是玩儿). Both ideas suggest a state of suspension and precarity. It is seen as an ongoing exercise of skill, and therefore the output is subordinate to performing the reiterated movements necessary to acquire the skill and enjoying that process. This is, of course, true for most exercises of *practice*: to try, and try again, until the desired result is achieved. Here, however, the result is not deferred, but it will never take on permanent form and is forever short-lived, transient and intangible.

‘Ephemeral’ is a concept that suggests fragility, uncertainty, transformation and finally disappearance (Dezeuze 2017). Theorizing the appeal of the ephemeral, I follow Anna Dezeuze, who in considering precarious artworks mobilizes the ideas of Jankélévitch and de Certeau. She unfolds how, to understand ephemeral practices, Jankélévitch uses the Greek term *kairos*, ‘opportunity’. Making use of the ephemeral is seizing an opportunity, which requires a heightened form of attention, or vigilance (Dezeuze 2017, p. 26). To emphasize, it is not about creating an

opportunity but, again, about seizing it. It is here de Certeau's idea of 'making do' that I touched upon earlier pertains. The ephemeral allows for an intensified, or as Deuzeze argues, vigilant, sensuous experience because there is no proof of materialization apart from the memory of its creation. This emphasizes experience rather than product, freeing it from the burden of fixation, preservation and commodification and perhaps even freeing it from value judgement: the bystander can just watch, the calligrapher can just create.



The stylistic rules of Chinese calligraphy are seldom negotiated in water calligraphy. Characters remain written in traditional characters¹¹ and most of the writers stick to writing in one style, modelling their writing after one master whose style they have internalized, which allows them to write in a steady flow. Observation shows that a wide selection of well-known Tang poetry, Maoist slogans, and Wang Xizhi's *Orchid Pavilion* are among the most popular subjects of writing – anything that the calligraphers know by heart so the flow of the writing can be maintained. While the shapes of the characters remain in line with calligraphic conventions, the way in which the characters are written down is more often done differently. One writer in Ditan Park has created his own 'mirror script' – his writing, da Vinci-style, is visually reversed, but still in a clear and regular script, while another calligrapher prides herself for having created 'double script': she holds a brush in each hand and simultaneously jots down the same

characters in regular script, intersected with drawings of people around her and animals of the Chinese zodiac.



We have thus seen different conceptualizations of calligraphy, but we have not seen a deviation from legibility or conventional content. This raises the question: why do these people – as their writing inevitably evaporates within minutes – not write something completely different, be it rebellious, clandestine or just mischievous, either in style or content? This possibility has been unanimously and unequivocally dismissed by calligraphers in the park. Calligraphy is perfect in its current form and it is not up to them – so they argue – in content or shape. Chastanet mentions in this context that the presence of uniformed guards is a (discrete) reality in the public parks and argues that a tacit status quo is shared between writers and authorities: you can write whatever you want, as long as the content is politically neutral (Chastanet 2013). In line with this reasoning, I would argue that *all* activity in the context of CCP-ruled China occurs in conditions of surveillance – making any deviation a subversion. Water calligraphy's public and somatic nature is thus as much a deviation as change in legibility or conventional content would be.

Moreover, however tempting it is to see in the water calligraphers' choice of 'safe' content a kind of self-censorship, as choosing approved texts mitigates government interference, I would argue that their choice of content should be explained within the workings of a traditional calligraphy discourse rather than by their need to, for example, voice public opinion through their lettering. The standard way of learning calligraphy involves a lengthy process of copying and modelling the works of ancient masters, and this is what happens here too. The work of the

water calligraphers should thus be approached as a type of calligraphy that is not deliberately opposing traditional calligraphy discourse and is not completely separate from it, but rather poaches from it, expands it, celebrates it – vernacularizes it.

Indeed, the way in which de Certeau separates the everyday from other means of cultural production is not unproblematic in contemporary contexts. Gardiner argues that ‘everyday life is vulnerable to the effects of commodification and bureaucratic structuring, and exhibits tendencies towards passive consumerism and an inward-looking, unreflective and routinized form’ (Gardiner 2000, p. 13). Although this is a pessimistic framing, the loosely organized and spontaneous celebration of water calligraphy, despite its ephemeral nature, is indeed susceptible to commercialization and is currently undergoing commodification as well as annexations in other domains. The different groups of water calligraphers in China are increasingly subsumed in associations overseen by the party-led neighbourhood committees (*shequjiedao* 社区街道) set up after the decline of the *danwei* to maintain a system for sustaining social order. One interviewee told me how, in 2002, their activity in Taoranting Park came to the attention of the neighbourhood committee and incorporated into its subdivision of ‘culture, sports and health’. The committee helped the calligraphers distribute their own newspaper, facilitated the sale of caps and linen bags with their logo and has set up an annual water calligraphy contest, now widely joined by other water calligraphy associations throughout the country.

That these groups now organize and sustain themselves through contests suggests a measure of professionalism, but also of standardization and disciplining that seems to contrast with the spirited, bottom-up nature of water calligraphy. Yet it is important to keep in mind that the vast majority of water calligraphers do not travel to contests, while they maintain their own daily routines of writing, within or outside an association. In 2018, which marked the forty-year anniversary of the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, the annual contest in Taoranting Park transmogrified into a large Taoran Water Calligraphy Culture Festival (*Taoran dishu wenhuajie* 陶然地书文化节), with the aim to ‘bring water calligraphy to the next level’ and promote the image of an attractive and creative city.¹² The festival now also includes famous calligraphers, free try-outs for visitors and, importantly, a water calligraphy contest for children. As one media outlet put it, water calligraphy grew ‘from an originally spontaneous personal leisure performance to an organized and disciplined team effort’,¹³ underscoring again the vulnerability of everyday activities and the ease with which they can be woven into governmental agendas.

Conclusion

I set out to complicate the creative-city blueprint by exploring spontaneous ephemeral creativity in the city centre of Beijing. This creativity is temporal,

fluid and located in the adaptations and rearrangements of pre-existing ideas and as such is not based on novelty. Shifting focus from art and creative industries clusters located in designated spaces to the seemingly banal setting of the public park allows us to draw a new typology of creativity through 'seizing opportunity', as de Certeau has argued. At the same time, while the calligraphic groups do not aspire to engage with the market or government, they are increasingly instrumentalized as a propaganda tool for a vibrant and creative city. The creative-city template can thus be extended and complicated as more organically developed, convivial, healthy, less productive, ephemeral and, perhaps, more *fun*, as water calligraphers insistently characterize their practice. As Allen Scott has argued:

any push to achieve urban creativity in the absence of a wider concern for conviviality and camaraderie (which need to be distinguished from the mechanical conception of 'diversity') in the urban community as a whole is doomed to remain radically unfinished. (Scott 2006, p. 15)

The research discussed here has shown that water calligraphy is still seen as calligraphy's charming 'other' and defined by its differences from its official counterpart: ephemerality as opposed to permanence, indifference to economic gain as opposed to the production of commodifiable work, ground versus paper, water versus ink. I have explored these differences to illuminate the modes of vernacular creativity that help challenge not just the creative city as promoted by the global cultural industries and the Chinese nation-state alike, but also challenge the idea of creativity itself. We can see creative deviation, as de Certeau refers to it, in the water calligraphers' bricolage of trash and their insistence on cheap materials and self-learning. We find creative deviation in their voluntary collective mobilization – as a divergence from their shared former experiences, not just a simple continuation, this is a creative choice rather than instilled routine. Furthermore, we see creative reappropriation in how water calligraphers take temporal ownership over the public park, creating a spectacle that serves their own (bodily) needs and desires. Finally, while their somatic practice deviates from the bodily discipline demanded from the traditional calligrapher, hidden in their movements we still find an ingrained master narrative of traditional calligraphy centring explicitly on the disciplined body. The lack of deviation from conventional content is an important observation that allows us to complicate ideas of the vernacular and the everyday as positioned completely outside the institutions or symbolic boundaries of 'official' creative and artistic practice. It shows that water calligraphy as a type of vernacular can speak back to notions of creativity as novelty. Within the urban landscape, retirees can carve out a creative space for themselves, outside designated art districts and creative industries clusters, where they happily borrow from, adhere to and vernacularize traditional calligraphy. In doing so, they disregard the

imperative of the new that is believed to be necessary for 'real' creativity and help us to further rethink the idea of creativity itself.

Notes

1. I will refer to the practice with this English translation throughout the article.
2. An interviewee mentioned that her group of water calligraphers that practice in Taoranting Park in Beijing started to proudly call themselves 'ground writers' (*dishuren* 地书人) three years previously, when they realized other groups in the park had been referring to them so; liking the sound of it, they took on the name.
3. See mini documentary via this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_8lj_nhRio&ab_channel=LauraVermeeren (Accessed 31 August 2021).
4. Zhang (2007) argues that, although it is a healthy practice, one should also be aware of certain risks: looking down at the characters for too long may cause a lack of blood in the head, and the long hours of standing can lead to a stiff back.
5. See, for example, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/2010-04/09/content_9707332.htm (Accessed 22 June 2020).
6. See, for example: <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2012/07-18/4041415.shtml> (Accessed 16 August 2021).
7. Some of the fieldwork quotations also appear in Vermeeren (2019).
8. The *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection* (also known simply as the *Orchid Pavilion*) – by Wang Xizhi (303–361 CE), the 'sage of calligraphy' – is the most celebrated and probably most often copied work in the history of Chinese calligraphy.
9. Square dancing, or *yangge* (秧歌) – often referred to in the media as *guang-chuang wu* (广场舞) – is a type of group dance originating in the north of China and appropriated by the Communist Party until the Cultural Revolution. In recent years, the dance has been rehabilitated and is performed all over China, mostly by women in public parks, but also in city squares, under bridges and as noted by Seetoo and Zhou 'basically in whatever outdoor space is empty, flat, and accessible' (Seetoo and Zou 2016, p. 22). The practice has, and continues to cause, considerable conflict, as residents complain about noise pollution, at times successfully prompting local bans on such dancing.
10. Often referred to as the 'three jewels' (*sanbao* 三宝) in Taoist contexts, these three concepts are the cornerstones of traditional Chinese medicine. *Jing* (精) refers to the basis of the material body; *qi* (气) is the life force, energy, breath or spirit; and *shen* (神) refers to the mind or soul in connection with the other two concepts.
11. In mainland China, a simplified form of Chinese characters is used, created by reducing the number of strokes as a way to speed up mass literacy in the late 1950s. In Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, as well as in Malaysia and Singapore, traditional characters are still used. In the discourse of calligraphy, traditional calligraphy is almost always employed, because the source texts date from before 1950 and are written in traditional characters.
12. See http://zfxgk.beijing.gov.cn/xcq11B064/gzdt53/2018-11/07/content_6b37e7e6c7b549eda29f0e1af5a8fb80.shtml (Accessed 12 June 2020) or http://www.bjwmb.gov.cn/xxgk/xcyj/t20181022_885072.htm (Accessed 12 June 2020).
13. <http://bj.people.com.cn/n2/2018/1019/c82846-32175537.html> (Accessed 12 June 2020).

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