

MASTER'S THESIS

The characters in the city: public display of Chinese calligraphy in urban space in Hong Kong

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Date of Award:
2015

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The Characters in the City
Public Display of Chinese Calligraphy
in Urban Space in Hong Kong

KHO Tin Sing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Dr. LAU Chak Kwong, Daniel

Hong Kong Baptist University

November 2014

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of MPhil at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation submitted to this or other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Signature: _____

Date: November 2014

ABSTRACT

The current thesis aims to offer a new perspective to understand identity creation in the city. It is an investigation into how the identity of a place is constructed by the text displays of Chinese calligraphy in landmarks of physical construction in urban space in Hong Kong.

The study was inspired by an earlier inquiry into architecture and a concurrent interest in Chinese culture, and as such this thesis tries to use the language of architecture and that of Chinese calligraphy which is a quintessential form of Chinese arts, to weave out the identity markers in the city.

Chapter Two then deals with the background theories in the study of text in urban space. By putting the text of calligraphy back into the context of urban space to create a spatial narrative, the homogenous urban space rediscovers a possibility to attain its distinctive character for a place.

To facilitate the discussion, a thematic perspective was taken in the investigation. The thesis will explore the issue through the analysis of both visual and textural materials in the city context. By putting the study of text of calligraphy back in the context of urban space, it reveals a new dimension in identity creation which has seldom been thoroughly investigated.

Chapter Three opens up the discussion with the calligraphy of the political figure, Dr. Sun Yat-sen who is regarded as the founding father of China. His brushworks are used to mark the footprints of his presence in Hong Kong through extensive urban construction.

Chapter Four deals with the use of calligraphy in two sites, both bear an emblematic meaning on the earlier history on the cessation of Hong Kong to the British. Despite of the fact that both sites are designed as Chinese garden, the

use of historical reference has taken in completely different approaches.

Calligraphy is again a key element in identity creation.

Chapter Five looks into the religious venues where ample amount of calligraphy works in different formats can be found. By referencing to historical incidents, the religious content is intermingled with the consents from government officials and emperors to create a common identity.

Chapter Six further examines the creation of public text of calligraphy by the commercial scene in urban space. The verticality of streetscape infested with commercial icons entails the use of large character writing in a more dramatized style. Thus, the tradition of calligraphy practice when carried out in the colonial urban space compels certain modifications to fit into the context. The conflict in reading direction of English and Chinese in many biliterate signage shows a contrast in cultural identity.

Based on the findings from this thematic investigation, the thesis opens up a new dimension in the understanding of brushworks of calligraphy in social and cultural context. By reading the calligraphy in its urban context in Hong Kong, it turns out that the text not only embodies the presence of the calligrapher but also links this presence to a richer spatial background. This crucial link between text, people and space is the fundamental activities for the creation of identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express special thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Lau Chak Kwong, Daniel who has inspired my interest in the research area of this study. His scholarly expertise in Chinese art and lifelong praxis in calligraphy has greatly broadened my intellectual, cultural and artistic knowledge. In addition to his valuable advice and supervision on my research study, he has shown great patience in guiding my study during the time when my mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness. His unfailing encouragement at the lowest ebb of my life has kindled my perseverance and courage in the study.

Besides, I am deeply grateful to the endurance shown on me by co-supervisor Dr. Lee Sai Chong, Jack. His scholarship on Art History and tolerance on my progress in the study has been an indispensable support during my difficult time.

I also benefitted greatly from the scholarship of Dr. Ting Wing Yan, Vivian in the study of object and connoisseurship. During her class, she has shared with me her research on how people engage in art activities in the context of cultural consumption. And her kind support through the sharing of her references must be appreciated with my deepest thanks.

My special thanks are also extended to Dr. Tam Cheung On from The Hong Kong Institution of Education for his helpful advice given to my presentation during The International Symposium on Creativity, Cultural and Related Industries: Implication for Greater China Region organised by The Hong Kong Institution of Education. I also had the opportunity to get acquaintance with Dr. Jean Berlie who has shown great support to my study. He has shared with me his inspirations during several afternoon tea occasions in the lounge of Mandarin Oriental which I must indeed acknowledge for his generosity and advices.

I was also fortunate to have the earnest assistance of my close friend Dr. Mak King Tong, Vaughan who kindly gave comments on the language aspect of my thesis. His expertise in academic writing was an invaluable help to my research which must be appreciated with my heartfelt thanks.

Lastly, I wish to give my deepest appreciation to the staff from The Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University without which would be impossible to finish my study.

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