

## MASTER'S THESIS

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

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

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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.

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