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Writing as cultural practice: case study of a Chinese heritage school in Belgium

Hsiu-Pei Hsu^a, Ching Lin Pang^b, Wim Haagdorens^c

^aIMMRC, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45/3615, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

^bIMMRC, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45/3615, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium; Department Translation and Interpreting, Artesis University College, Antwerp

^cIMMRC, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45/3615, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium; Department Translation and Interpreting, Artesis University College, Antwerp

Abstract

By critically assessing the Chinese language pedagogy in a Chinese heritage school in Brussels, we analyze how the school insists on teaching traditional Chinese characters, which are used in Taiwan, by emphasizing the significance of writing, while adopting the transcription system *Hanyu Pinyin*, which was created in the People's Republic of China, and is emerging as the international standard of Chinese Romanization. The article reveals the cultural implications and meanings of writing Chinese characters, and conceives writing as a practice able to imprint cultural meanings on the body. However, although the Chinese heritage school considers Chinese characters as an essential aspect of linguistic and cultural education, the students, who are hardly native Chinese speakers and are educated in a western environment, develop their own ways to use written Chinese. The fact that they heavily rely on romanization (*Hanyu Pinyin*), rather than on traditional characters, suggests different cognitive processes and illustrates deviation from the school's didactically envisioned cultural practice, which confirms the unique position of the heritage school as a crossroads of cultures.

Keywords: Chinese characters, Chinese heritage school, didactics, writing, habitus, cultural practice, hanyu pinyin.

Introduction

Chinese characters (Hànzi) are a writing system for Chinese languages and languages in neighbouring countries like Japanese and ancient Korean. Chinese characters have existed for over three thousand years and been popularly used (or adopted) in eastern and south-eastern Asian areas for a long time. The writing system diverges in various ways from the Latin orthographic system.

Classic pedagogy of Chinese literacy emphasizes the ability of recognition of characters as well as the ability of writing. These competences form an inseparable twin in the pedagogy of Chinese language (Tan et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2008). There is deeply entrenched belief that the only and one orthodox way to learn Chinese characters is through regular and repetitious writing and this over a lengthy period of time (DeFrancis, 1984; McDonald, 2011). Hence, for Chinese native-speaker children, they are supposed to write as many as possible Chinese characters during the entire course of their school age.

^a Email address: Hsiupe.Hsu@student.kuleuven.be

^b Tel +32 16 3 25,499 or +32 3 16 26 007; Email address: ChingLin.Pang@soc.kuleuven.be

^c Email address: wim.haagdorens@artesis.be

Although the classic pedagogy remains important, it has been subject to change within the context of globalization. The pedagogy has been accommodated to the needs of the learners, especially in the case of foreign learners (Guder et al., 2007). With the popularity of Internet, the computer-assisted instruction (CAI) becomes increasingly promoted. Through the process of romanizing Chinese characters into letters (Norman, 1988), as well as the popularity of personal computers, handwriting is gradually replaced by typing in the Chinese writing world (Xu, 2009). People do not need to really memorize the exact order of each stroke of a character when typing a text. They can just rely on knowing the pronunciation and thus recognizing the character.

We conduct a one-year study in the Sun Yat-sen School in Brussels, a Chinese heritage school, to observe the methods for teaching modern standard Chinese (Mandarin) to ethnic Chinese children, most of whom are not native Mandarin speakers. One phenomenon is outstanding: the school emphasizes the importance of characters as in the schools in Taiwan, where the official language is Mandarin and the traditional non-simplified characters are still used. At school, students are supposed to recognize as many characters as possible by laboriously (re)writing them. In the first stage of language teaching, the school uses *Hanyu Pinyin*, the most common alphabetic transcription method, but then focus on the sole use of characters.

This particular method approaches the students as native speakers. But if we compare the teaching methods of the school with other Chinese language schools where Mandarin Chinese is taught as a foreign language (TCFL), another approach is adopted. Generally the methods of TCFL do not treat characters as priority teaching material. It often starts with listening comprehension and speaking, followed by reading and, finally, writing. Some learners will stick to only learning *Hanyu Pinyin* for listening and speaking, and never learn how to read and write Chinese (Guder, 2007).

In this article, we will explore why the school, having a close relation with Taiwan government, is dedicated to pass on traditional Chinese characters, which are chiefly used outside mainland China, especially in Taiwan, but also in Hong Kong, Macao and Singapore. We argue that writing as cultural practice, with characters as cultural objects, constitutes one of the core values of Chinese culture. This explains why writing has been subject to intense debate in the context of modernization in the last century. Writing, developed in the specific historical context in China, seems tedious and outdated in the current post-industrial and technology-driven era, but the age old pedagogy of rewriting and assimilating through sheer repetition is sustained as it is believed that cultural values are not passed on merely by the rational process of assimilating thoughts and ideas, but also learned through bodily actions resulting into ‘tacit’ or ‘embodied knowledge’. Learning characters by handwriting makes the body remember the image, the sound, the stroke order, or even the beauty of each word. The memory of characters is stored in bodily practices through writing so that people can use them automatically.

Writing as a practice structured by Chinese characters

How do Chinese characters matter? If one intends to understand the meaning of handwriting in Chinese culture, one should keep in mind that writing as a social and cultural practice is produced and reproduced in the historical structure of Chinese characters, and vice versa. The importance of handwriting is not limited to the purpose of written communication; the act of writing can be a purpose in itself.

The use of Mandarin is, strictly speaking, a kind of social practice, with divergent faces in different fields. Various mutations have changed language in different ways, but once those changed parts become instituted, they too represent symbolic capital and in turn have the potency to change people’s practices.

In order to understand a practice, we should examine the variables habitus, capital and field. Habitus are systems of “durable, transposable dispositions”. According to Bourdieu, they are “structured structures”, that structure practices and representations. These durable dispositions have a sort of energy to objectively “regulate” practices and

representations in unconscious ways; hence, habitus transform the artificial into nature, and make history contemporary (Bourdieu, 1977:72 & 1990).

Characters are relatively ancient. They are not unchangeable but, compared to spoken language, they are a more stable and less diverse. Chinese characters, especially the complicated strokes, form a structure for the practice of writing while the practice of writing also affects the evolution of characters. Writing and characters are intertwined because of the complexity of characters, which forces learners to spend a considerable length of time to acquire them. The acquisition of the ability of writing characters includes industrious and repeatedly practicing. Besides, since traditionally writing brushes were used to write characters, an wide array of rules were established for writing. These methods and rules are not only practical but are also endowed with social, cultural and even spiritual meanings. Repeatedly practicing adds a bodily dimension to the mere cognitive act.

The significance of the body does not only refer to the symbolic dimension, the presentation and representation, but also and perhaps more emphatically to the actions the body undertakes or the ways in which the body moves (Scheper-Hughes et al.,1987). In the theory of practice, Bourdieu notices the link between belief and body. “Practical belief is not a ‘state of mind’, but rather a state of the body”, he said. “Enacted belief, instilled by the childhood learning...is the form par excellence of the ‘blind or symbolic thought’,...which is the product of quasi-bodily dispositions, operational schemes...”. Finally, “practical sense, social necessity turned into nature, converted into motor schemes and body automatism, is what causes practices to be sensible” (Bourdieu, 1990: 68-69). If a belief only exists in the mind, it is merely an idea and will not necessarily last for a long time. Only when a belief becomes part of the body, and works through unconscious body movements, it becomes durable, enforced with its social-cultural connotations.

The endured structure and the cultural and moral values implied in Chinese characters are passed on through the practice of writing itself and the related rules of writing. Writing is not only related to literacy, but also the representation of one’s personality. This is reflected in common sayings such as *rén rú qí zì* (‘One’s nature resembles his/her handwriting’) or *rén zhèng-zì zhèng* (‘If one is good, the handwriting of characters will be good’). The process of writing has always been seen as a process of uniting the self with Nature, helping people to find harmony between the inner and the external world. Such cultural meanings are still significant and influential. In addition, ancient rules related to writing are still taught: how to hold a brush, how to grind the ink stick, how to draw a stroke, how to arrange each stroke in a character, and so on. Even though today people do not use writing brushes anymore and brush calligraphy is now considered ‘art’, its rules and principles are still present in the teaching of handwriting. Students are required to follow precise rules when writing down character after character. As mentioned above, the classic way of learning Chinese requires repeated practice: That means, if one wants to get an agreeable level of Chinese literacy, he must observe these writing rules and guides numerous times. Finally, the rules and guides of writing, as well as the characters themselves, become a kind of movement of body. After sufficient practice, the student automatically and unconsciously combines a series of actions. It is through these body movements that characters are imprinted into the minds, and become part of memory.

The cultural meanings of handwriting in Chinese language

Handwriting is about more than producing texts; firstly it represents the self of the writer, secondly the relationship between his/her inner world with Nature as well as society. Thirdly, it also represents aesthetic principles. These cultural values have been developed since the early days of the 2000 year long writing brush era, but the influence is still widely present in Chinese cultural circles.

Handwriting is often seen to represent the personality. Children are reminded of common sayings such as ‘one’s nature resembles his/her handwriting’. They are taught that if one writes characters well, then s/he will probably have a good personality and mind too. On the contrary, a person whose handwriting is ugly and messy, will

probably have a personality and mind in the same sorry state. In a convenient play on words: while writing characters, children train their character.

The link between proper handwriting and good personality comes from the traditional Confucianist philosophy of self-cultivation. Traditionally, practicing writing was seen as a method of training the mind. Writing itself is not only delightful to the eye but also “an inspiration to the spirit”, which is a practice of mindfulness for promoting self-reflection and self-cultivation and leads mind and heart into a harmonious relationship with the society and the Nature (Hue, 2010). According to this approach, each line and stroke embodies the writer’s spirit and expresses this in a concrete form. Moreover, brush calligraphy is seen as a method to gain a peaceful mind. There were many guidelines for calligraphy practices so as to promote the sense of mindfulness, such as grinding the ink stick, controlling the breath, allow the gentle flow of the *qi* (life energy), etc. These guidelines were practical, leading learners step by step, always including the spiritual dimension, treating writing as the reflection of the writer. If one is peaceful, one can write mindfully and have perfect writing to mirror the state of the mind. Therefore, writers who intend to write well have to train themselves in the process of writing, concentrating on every moment of writing and keeping away from all disturbing influences of daily-life events. In brush calligraphy, a holistic involvement is highly praised. Writers are asked to involve sincerity of the mind, sensitivity of the heart, the flow of *qi* (one’s basic energy) and applying all their skills when they do the writing. This holistic involvement in the practices will be shown in the final works of the writing. Ancient calligraphists therefore raise the idea of the spiritual self and physical body to be merged (in Chinese expression “*Shēnxīn hé yī*”). Writing calligraphy is regarded as a way of spiritual discipline and a gateway to the state of enlightenment (Hue, 2010). In the philosophy of merging body and spirit into the harmonious One, handwriting and the writer him/herself can no longer be separated. Handwriting becomes an expressive extension of one’s inner world.

Apart from these psychological, spiritual and social dimensions, brush calligraphy has an aesthetic value. The written words themselves have evolved into a sort of art (Gunn, 2001). Different styles of calligraphy, dating from different historic periods, had an influence on the way characters are shaped and written today, and are still being practiced purely for their artistic value. Poems written in calligraphy merge poetic imagery and material aesthetics into an artistic whole. One single character is both word and painting.

It is a great challenge for heritage schools and their teachers to keep pace with the rapidly evolving cultural contexts in which their students grow up. At the same time, these institutes, as crossroads of cultures, can be places of stability, by providing points of reference in the creation of the youngsters' identities. So if anything, these schools deserve support for their core mission: nourishing and transmitting a much-cherished cultural heritage.

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