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## Calligraphying the Tainan Area With Chen Shih-hsien

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**Art and Material Culture in the Tainan Area**

(南瀛地區的藝術與物質文化 2020)

Yolaine Escande

**paper title:**

“Calligraphying the Tainan area with Chen Shih-hsien 陳世憲”

**abstract:**

This paper revolves around the topic of visual arts, and more specifically the secular tradition of Chinese calligraphy. It will examine how this art, embodying “the kernel of Chinese culture”, may also be devoted to promoting and praising the specificities and beauties of a small region, without jettisoning its artistic value.

In the field of visual arts, Tainan not only hosts museums, and countless temples, art galleries and exhibitions, but it also was the cradle of outstanding artists, such as calligrapher Chen Shih-hsien. The example of this artist offers us the opportunity: 1/ to examine the relationship between the centre and the periphery, 2/ to consider the question of local identity, and finally 3/ to study the issue of “territoriality”, and of the graphic writing of a specific place.

Chen Shih-hsien, born in 1966, has acquired an international aura, his artworks are exhibited all around the world (France, Germany, Japan, Korea, United States, etc.). He uses the Chinese traditional art of the brush to express the spirit of the Tainan people, and also the specificities of the places (cities, villages) themselves.

Chen Shih-hsien lives in a small village called Bai-ho (White River), Tainan District. One of the first characteristics of his calligraphies, accounting for his fame, was to write “white river” suggesting the growth of the plentiful lotuses of his hometown, adding their colours, instead of simply writing the two words with black ink.

The methodology will confront the artworks, the technique of Chen Shih-hsien, and the traditional way of calligraphying, and it will attempt to underline the artist’s originality and novelty. The philosophical tool of the calligrapher is the “expression of emotions”, a classical theme in Chinese calligraphy.

Thus, the paper will examine the questions of the materiality and immateriality of culture and art, through the issue of territory and of place, as well as political, social, religious, cultural stakes that arise from the relationships between an artist and a specific area.

**keywords:**

Chinese calligraphy, Chen Shih-hsien, Bai-ho, Tainan, territory, place, Xinying, Guanmiao, Tugou

## 第六屆南瀛研究國際學術研討會

### 南瀛地區之藝術與物質文化

Chinese calligraphy as a traditional art is often considered “old fashioned”, not adapted to our globalised world. Chinese calligraphy refers to a literati’s practice, considered the “kernel of the kernel of Chinese culture”.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it seems to be entangled with the official power, especially in China.<sup>2</sup> But it appears that in Taiwan, such a practitioner of Chinese calligraphy as Chen Shih-hsien 陳世憲 has updated this art into a contemporary expression.

One of Chen’s calligraphy’s characteristics, and actually its major characteristic, is its “territoriality” (*tudi xing* 土地性). It is stated on his website in the following manner:

“After [Chen Shih-hsien] completed his study of ancient steles and manuscripts [models of calligraphy], he engaged his calligraphy creations into the people, things and affairs on the territory (*tudi*), expressed through written lines, all bearing a strong narrativity”. 他在完成了古代書法碑帖的完整學習之後，繼而將書法的創作著重在土地上的人事物所形成的線條書寫，具有強烈的故事性。<sup>3</sup>

He further argues that the history of a territory (*tudi*) can be expressed through brushstrokes.

Actually, and more precisely, Chen Shih-hsien selects the names of places, and writes them into meaningful calligraphies. He uses not only brushstrokes, but also colours, to express the name of a place. The places he calligraphies are mainly the names of cities, or of villages, sometimes of a city’s neighbourhoods.

For instance, Chen Shih-Hsien is native of Bai-ho (*Baihe* 白河), in what was formerly called Tainan county (*Tainan xian* 台南縣), in Nan-Ying area (*Nanying diqu* 南瀛地區). The specificity of Bai-ho, literally “white river”, is the numerous

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<sup>1</sup> Hsiung Ping-Ming 熊秉明(1922-2002), “The kernel of the kernel of culture” (*Wenhua hexin de hexin* 文化核心的核心), *Lion’s Art (Xionshi meishu 雄獅美術)*, Spring 1995, n° 288, pp. 23-26.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Curt Kraus, *Brushes with Power. Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://chensworkshop.weebly.com/211092031626360278612930533394.html>

lotuses filling the landscape. When they bloom, the ponds shimmer with the green of the leaves and the pink of the flowers. That is why Chen Shih-Hsien calligraphies *baihe* not with black ink brushstrokes, as we should expect following traditional calligraphy's rules, but with green and pink brushstrokes (fig. 1).

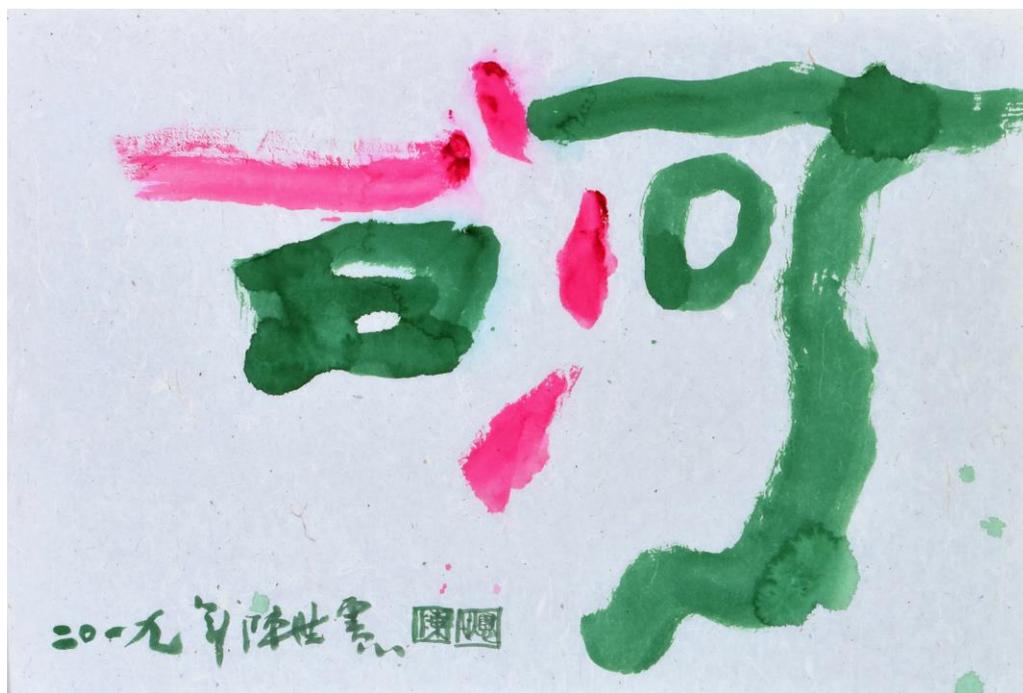


Fig. 1: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Bai-ho*, colours on paper, 2019. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

Though, even if colours are used, this is by no means painting, because the written characters are clearly readable.

In choosing to write *baihe* with colours instead of black ink, Chen Shih-Hsien clearly renews the secular art of calligraphy.<sup>4</sup> But also, and mainly, he relates a story, that of a specific place, of Bai-ho, on Tainan's territory, and an emotion too: what he feels when thinking of Bai-ho. Although the name of the place means "white river", the experience he has of Bai-ho, his hometown, is one brimming with pink lotuses, that is why his calligraphies render the pink and green colours of the lotuses.

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<sup>4</sup> Adding colours to the brushstroke is one of the novelties of Chinese modern calligraphy trend. But usually, even in Chinese modern calligraphy, the colours are added to black ink (see Yang Yingshi 楊應時 (ed.), *Ba Shu Parade: 99' Chengdu Retrospective of Chinese Modern Calligraphy at the end of the 20th Century* (*Ba Shu dian bing: 99 Chengdu 20 shijimo Zhongguo xiandai shufa huigu* 巴蜀點兵: '99 成都 20 世紀末中國現代書法回顧), Chengdu: Sichuan International Culture Exchange Center 四川國際文化交流中心, 1999, and *The International Symposium Words and Writing* (*Guoji shufa wenxianzhan. Wenzhi yu shuxie* 國際書法文獻展-文字與書寫), Tai-chung: National Museum of Fine Arts 國立台灣美術館, 2001), and not used without ink as does Chen Shih-Hsien. Therefore, Chen Shih-Hsien has initiated a completely new feature.

This paper will endeavour to consider several questions, all related to the topics of art and territory, art and place. Firstly, what is a *diqu*, does it correspond to a territory? And what is a territory, what is a place? Secondly, what is the relationship between a territory, a place and art? And finally, what is the specificity of calligraphic art in Chen Shih-Hsien's practice? These issues will give us the opportunity to reconsider the importance of art in contemporary society.

## Territory and place

First of all, what does *diqu* 地區 mean? Composed of two characters, *di* 地, "place, ground, earth, land", and *qu* 區, "area, region, district", *diqu* is generally translated as "territory" or "region" in several dictionaries. For instance, *Xianggang diqu* 香港地區 is officially translated as "the territory of Hong Kong" (see Legco). But the English word "territory" is often translated in Chinese *tudi* 土地, constituted of *tu*, meaning "earth, clay, local, indigenous, unsophisticated" and *di* "place, ground, earth, land".

In the case of *Nanying diqu*, Nan-ying area being either a County or a District, in both cases, it is a territory in a geographical sense.

For French geographer Maryvonne Le Berre:

"A territory can be defined as a portion of the earth surface, appropriated by a social group to ensure its reproduction and the satisfaction of its vital needs. It is a spatial entity, the living space of the group, inseparable from it."<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, a territory is the result of human action, it is not the consequence of the topography, nor a physical or climatic element. It is a space where competing and diverging powers vie, and its legitimacy comes from the representations it generates—whether symbolic or patrimonial or imaginary. These representations are themselves nurtured by the dominant language spoken by this territory's populations.

Thus, a territory has a social, political, and administrative status (district, or county, or city, etc.). It is mainly immaterial. The notion of territory is historically rooted in the administrative organization created by the State. It is circumscribed along spatial boundaries. In political terms, a territory refers to power structures and leads to defining relationships between different political and economic agents.<sup>6</sup> A

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<sup>5</sup> Maryvonne Le Berre, « Territoires », in Antoine Bailly, Robert Ferras, Denise Pumain (dir.), *Encyclopédie de géographie*, Paris, Economica, 1995, p. 603: "Le territoire peut être défini comme la portion de la surface terrestre, appropriée par un groupe social pour assurer sa reproduction et la satisfaction de ses besoins vitaux. C'est une entité spatiale, le lieu de vie du groupe, indissociable de ce dernier."

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lévy, « Les découpages du territoire », in Hugues de Jouvenel, *Radioscopie de la France en mutation, 1950-2030. L'évolution socio-économique, les modes de vie, les territoires, les villes, la mobilité et l'environnement en 40 dimensions*, Association Futuribles International, Paris, 2003.

territory is also linked to appropriating processes, and senses of belonging. It is an inhabited space, which implies a space where people live and that need to visualize. This space is a symbolic and cultural resource, and these resources are also a construct.<sup>7</sup>

A territory is a constructed and imagined object, as well as a matter open to interpretations. That is why it is constantly mobilised and re-invented by a variety of agents, and, in other words, it grounds what is common (by defining a community). It is constantly transformed by the representations and the investments it is inhabitants. This is what territorial marketing mobilises when working on the identity and the image of the territories.

French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, in *What is Philosophy?*, consider the act of thinking an act anchored on a territory.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the work of an artist on a territory, is a kind of "situated writing". Chen Shih-hsien mentions "monographic" or "territorial writing" (*dizhi shufa* 地誌書法). Therefore, following Deleuze and Guattari, the artists and the artworks establish a relationship with the spaces they invest.

For instance, for Chen Shih-hsien, Bai-ho is not only an abstract space, it is a place he inhabits, and with which he has interactions. When he thinks of Bai-ho, the lotuses come up in his mind, and the colours they bear. The calligraphy he creates is the result of his emotions and imagination about Bai-ho.

But a territory is also constituted of places. A place is meant to have a name. For instance, Tainan is both a territory—formerly the district of Tainan 台南縣, the area of Tainan 臺南區, now Tainan City 臺南市—and a place: the meaning of its name is "South of Tai[wan]". Bai-ho is a territory—a small village—and also a place with a river (and lotuses).

Michel de Certeau, another French philosopher, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*,<sup>9</sup> considers space as a practiced place. The difference between place and space has been studied by Edward S. Casey. For Casey,

"In the modern period, [...] 'place' was absorbed into 'space' as the dominant term of Eurocentric discourse".<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the perception the modern subject has of a place has been absorbed, so that "The modern subject is a placeless subject." (p. 292)

Casey further explains:

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lamizet, « Les incertitudes du territoire », *Quaderni*, 34, 1997, pp. 57-68.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 67-68, 101; p. 85: "thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth."

<sup>9</sup> Michel de Certeau *L'invention du quotidien I. Arts de faire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Edward S. Casey, "Smooth Spaces and Rough-Edged Places: The Hidden History of Place", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 51, No. 2, Dec., 1997, (pp. 267-296) p. 288.

<http://escasey.com/Article/Smooth Spaces and Rough-Edged Places The.pdf>

"The modern subject is radically dislocated, someone who does not know the difference between place and space, or even the difference between either of these and the sites to which he or she is confined in the pseudo-voluntarism that thinks that such a subject can go any place. However this global nomadism is a delusion, since to be able to go anywhere is to be located nowhere." (pp. 293-294)

In other words, for Casey, "To be is to be in place; conversely, to be without place is not to be." (p. 274)

This reflection offered by Casey helps understand the importance of Chen Shih-Hsien's approach of "territoriality" (*tudi xing* 土地性). When writing Tainan in the shape of the map of the island of Taiwan (fig. 2), all Taiwanese can understand, this interpretation of the graphic visual aspect of Tainan provides its inhabitants with the feeling of being in a real place, with a name conveying a temporal and historical dimension (Tainan is the former capital of Taiwan).



Fig. 2: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Tainan ren*, ink on paper, 2005. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

Besides, the graphic shapes of the brushstrokes are not simple lines as Paul Klee defined them,<sup>11</sup> they are not mere delineations either, but they embody lively dynamism. Like a body, the strokes can be described in terms of bones, flesh, sinew, blood, etc.

Chen Shih-Hsien clearly calligraphies the place of Tainan, and not its space. The calligraphy does not refer to the administrative territory, but to a place of human experiences, that of its inhabitants and their memory.

If a place undoubtedly determines our relationship to the world, we assimilate its dynamism as well, and we act upon it. A place cannot be limited, it cannot be quantified either. A place exists as a place as soon as human beings keep it alive in their minds. But such a memory varies, it is always personal, for instance, Bai-ho in Chen Shih-Hsien's expression, is colourful (fig. 1). We can catch a glimpse of the contours of a place when we exchange about it. These exchanges take the form of face-to-face interactions, and also of interactions between an artist and someone gazing at the artwork where the artist has inscribed their vision of the world and of the place.

For instance, Chen Shih-hsien has created what he calls the "monographic calligraphies" (*dizhi shufa* 地誌書法) of the neighbourhood of Tugou 土溝, "Earth Ditch", in the Tainan area. The territory of Tugou itself is constituted of six villages (*liu cun* 六村): Aozhi 凹仔, Xia Tugou 下土溝, Ding Tugou 頂土溝, Wuzhu Weicuo 無竹圍厝, Zhuzijiao 竹仔腳, and Guopi 過埤.

The names that have been given to the villages are themselves related to the history and the topography of the territory. Chen Shih-hsien created calligraphies of the names of all these villages, each of them having a relationship with the history of the place. In this sense, they are not only spaces, but places with their own accounts and narrativity.

This is the way Chen Shih-Hsien explains the names of these places:

"The name of the place of Tugou originates from an irrigation canal running through all the village with draining and irrigating waterways belonging to a hydraulic work, and it produced the emergence of three huge settlements of houses along the canal's North embankment. The higher part at the East of the canal was called "Tugou Heights" (Ding Tugou), the lower part "Low Tugou" (Xia Tugou). Toward the west, the topography is composed of a depression and is called "The Depressed" (Aozhi); the three other settlements

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<sup>11</sup> In *Eye and Mind* (in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), Merleau-Ponty claims that in Matisse or in Klee's paintings: "There are no lines visible per se" ("il n'y a pas de lignes visibles en soi", *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 73), and proposes that the line marks a distinction between this thing and something else (pp. 71-74). On that basis, Merleau-Ponty develops about the importance of colour in Matisse's or Klee's painting (p. 74), because only colour renders things visible ("rend visible"). For Merleau-Ponty, the line is said to exist only in "making visible" something else (p. 74).

are scattered in the middle of the fields. At the edge of the forest, close to the embankment, approximately 30 households are called "Foot of the Bamboos" (Zhuzi jiao), approximately other 30 households towards West are called "No Bamboos Surrounding the Houses" (Wuzhu Weicuo). From Zhuzi Jiao towards the East, there is Bai-ho's "Houses Surrounded By Bamboos" (Zhu Weicuo), again towards the East, there is a village of tall bamboos, "The Big Raw of Bamboos" (Da Pai Zhu). The four names of settlement places related to bamboos from the East to the West are connected and constitute a line, and through the places' names: from the thock row of bamboos to where the houses are surrounded by bamboos, to the foot of the bamboos, then to where the houses are not surrounded by bamboos: from this point of view, the landscape's topography is visible."

土溝村：

土溝地名由來是因村中一條水利會所屬中排灌溉溝貫穿全村，三個大聚落屋舍沿溝北岸成形，溝東頂稱「頂土溝」在下稱「下土溝」，在往西地勢凹陷稱「凹仔」，另三個聚落分布田中央，林初埤邊約 30 戶稱「竹仔腳」，往西約 30 戶稱「無竹圍厝」，「竹仔腳」往東是白河「竹圍厝」，再往東是大竹里「大排竹」，四個跟竹有關地名的聚落東往西連成一直線，地名從很多一大排的竹子到有竹子圍著厝到竹子的腳下到沒有竹子圍著的厝，由這角度就可看出地景了。

"There are approximately 9 households in Guopi's General's Embankment, because the living area of Guopi's inhabitants absolutely necessitated to make use of a bamboo raft to cross to the embankment leading to Bai-ho "Sweetgum tree forest" (Fangzi Lin) (the sweetgum tree is the liquidambar formosana), that is why it is called "Go Over the Embankment" (Guopi). Among the first inhabitants of Guopi, there was a military candidate who passed the imperial examination, this is the origin of the name of General's Embankment (Jiangjun Pi). The embankment at the edge of the forest, General Embankment and Small South Sea (Xiao Nanhai) are connected, their main function is to recycle the water from Bai-ho's irrigation and recycling water dam. From the networks of the irrigation dyke, we can deduce the origins of the names of Tugou's six settlements."

「過埤」在將軍埤畔約 9 戶，因為過埤居民的生活圈必須撐竹筏渡埤往白河「枋仔林」（枋就是楓），所以稱「過埤」，過埤先人出過一位武舉人，是將軍埤名的由來，林初埤將軍埤小南海是連通的，主要功能是回收白河水庫的灌溉回收水，由埤塘灌溉脈絡可推演土溝六個聚落產生與地名由來。

But there is another explanation, offered by M. Su Chaoji 蘇朝基, Secretary-General 總幹事 of the Association for the Development of the rural communities of Tugou 土溝農村社區發展協會.

M. Su Chaoji considers Wuzhu Weicuo, "No Bamboos Surrounding the Houses", is:

"The name of a huge household's family house with red rooftiles in Minnanese style; at that time this family was wealthy and asked for military protection, because the area was blighted by bandits. The military are today's insurance for round-the-clock defense patrols, this is the reason why, unlike in Guopi, they did not use bamboo pikes erected all around the village to secure the river lowing at the center, but the people and the horse cars had necessarily to pass a wooden drawbridge. Zhuzi Jiao, "Foot of the Bamboos", is South of Guopi, and it also lies below, therefore, its name is related to its geographic situation."

是以一戶閩南式紅瓦屋的大戶人家命名，當時很有錢而請壯丁來維護安全，因為當時常有土匪到處行搶，壯丁也就是現在的保全二十四小時巡守，所以不用像過埤護村河內圍種刺竹當城牆，人員、馬車出入必須經過放下的木板橋。竹仔腳是過埤的南邊也是下方，所以名稱是跟地理位置有關。

But then, how to render such a complex history in "topographic writings"? How to create, out of this history and memory, an artistic object? With this goal in mind, Chen Shih-hsien has calligraphied the names of these villages (fig. 3), and he this is how he accounts for his graphic choices:

"1/ Tugou ("Earth Ditch"): a buffalo ploughing a field with force.

In the field, there is much mud, the buffalo ploughs the field laboriously."

1. 土溝：水牛犁田很出力。

田裡面有很多爛泥巴，水牛犁田很費力的樣子。

Chen Shih-hsien here compares his brushstrokes to the impression given by a buffalo ploughing a muddy field. This means the brushstroke must have a visual effect of painstaking labour, it must display the resistance of the paper under the pressure of the inkbrush.



Fig. 3: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Tugou*, and of the six villages of Ding Tugou, Xia Tugou, Aozhi, Zhuizi Jiao, Wuzhu Weicuo, and Guopi, embroidered on a cap. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

Tugou is written twice by Chen Shih-hsien, once in Ding Tugou (fig. 4), and once in Xia Tugou (fig. 5). In both cases, the brushstroke has a similar effect of painstaking labour, but the characters are structured very differently, and the ink colour varies as well. The reading goes from the left to the right. In Ding Tugou, “Earth Ditch Heights”, there are three characters; the first one, *ding*, “top”, “up”, is upright, but the second, *tu*, “earth”, is bent, with the two horizontal strokes actually slightly higher on the right than on the left, while the vertical stroke is upright. This way of writing instils dynamism to the character. The third one, *gou*, is completely bent on the left. The effect is, when reading from the left to the right, that of climbing a slope uphill: at the outset, it is easy, then it turns more and more difficult. The brushstrokes are thick, the characters easy to recognize and read, but *tu* and *gou* leaning to the left give an impression of strain. That is exactly what Chen Shih-hsien intended to express, in order to conjure up the image of a painstaking

buffalo, striving to go up a hill. After all, Ding Tugou is uphill, and we have to climb to reach it. Thus, the calligraphy perfectly renders the meaning of the place.

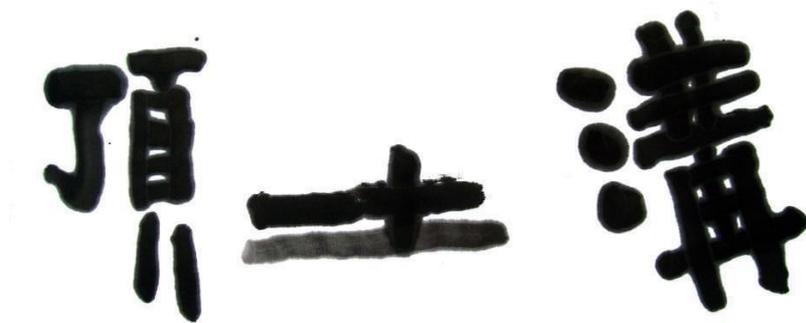


Fig. 4: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Ding Tugou*, ink on paper, 2003. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

In Xia Tugou (fig. 5), “Low Earth Ditch”, the brush effect is different altogether. The three characters have almost the same size, all of them are flattened.



Fig. 5: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Xia Tugou*, ink on paper, 2003. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

If we compare the *gou* of Ding Tugou and of Xia Tugou as written by Chen, we can easily see the difference: in Ding Tugou, the *gou* is stretching upwards (although it is bent), but in Xia Tugou, it seems to be oppressed by a burden. The flat characters express the topographic situation of the place, situated below Tugou. The impression of painstaking labour is visible as well, in the thick brushstrokes, written slowly (in Chinese calligraphy, the slower a character is written, the thicker the brushstrokes are). The light colour of the first three short strokes of *gou*, one

overlapping the other, corresponding to the “water” semantic radical, expresses visually the presence of water in the ditch. Normally, in Chinese calligraphy, the colour of ink is black, more or less thick, more or less dry, but it is definitely not pale, i.e. resulting from watery ink, like in the case of ink wash. Here, the brushstrokes for the “water” radical are pale on purpose. They clearly express the presence of water in this lower part of the ditch.

“2/Wuzhu Weicuo”: given that there is a large raw of bamboos at the front, and given that there are no bamboos surrounding the dwelling in this settlement, as a consequence, when looking at the sunset, [the landscape] becomes even clearer, that is why on the top of the *wu* (“no”) character, the dot is red.”

## 2. 無竹圍厝

因為前面竹子一大排，到這一個聚落變成沒有竹子來圍住了，於是，觀看夕陽的時候就變得更清楚，於是，無的上面一點就是紅色的。



Fig. 6: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Wuzhu Weicuo*, ink on paper, 2003. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

In other words, Chen Shih-hsien transcribes the evocation of Wuzhu Weicuo’s landscape at sunset (fig. 6), suggesting it by a red dot on top of the first character of the name, which is constituted by four characters. Under the red dot, the rest of the character *wu* has the aspect of a fence, and the second character, *zhu*, “bamboo”, has the appearance of bamboo leaves. But the bamboo leaves also conjure up the image of two people looking over the fence to watch the sunset.

“3/ Guopi: it corresponds to the wrinkles of the water and the waves ripples made when moving a raft with a bamboo pole.”

3. 過埤:

就是撐竹筏時的水波紋路。

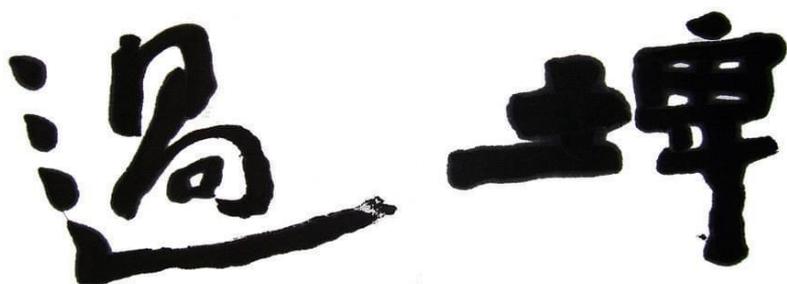


Fig. 7: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Guopi*, ink on paper, 2003. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

In the calligraphy of *Guopi*, “Go Over the Embankment” (fig. 7), the wrinkles of the water and the waves ripples are expressed with the three dots on the left, suggesting the trace of a paddle plunging regularly into the water; it is followed by a trembling horizontal brushstroke towards the right, probably suggesting a raft progressing in water.

“4/Aozi: this is a quite low settlement”.

4. 凹仔:

比較低窪的聚落。



Fig. 8: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Aozi*, ink on paper, 2003. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

In the topographic writing of *Aozi*, “The Depressed” (fig. 8), the shape of the *ao* and first character itself is a pictogram. The calligrapher insists on the brushstrokes applied with considerable force.

These topographic writings (*disbuxie* 地書寫) created by Chen Shih-hsien are all very closely related to the history of the place and of its names. Each of them have a story, recalled by the brushstrokes, the structure of the characters, and even by the colour of the ink.

In the European tradition, the relationships established between a place, a site, a territory and human beings is determined by language. Language is fundamental, and especially oral language. But in the case of Chen Shih-Hsien’s calligraphy, the language is not only oral, it is graphic, visual, and embodied into brushstrokes. This enlarges the concept of geo-philosophy coined by Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>12</sup> For the philosopher Eric Dardel, “the geographic reality acts on man by means of an awakening of consciousness”.<sup>13</sup> We all, but especially artists, become aware of our own conditions thanks to the nature and environment surrounding us. Those also act on our temper, and lead us to sense that we share the same nature as our surrounding elements. In other words, Dardel considers that humans are determined by their geographic existence, and their artistic production originates in it.

Similarly, the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro 和辻哲郎(1889-1960) asks:

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (translated by Brian Massumi, London, New York: Continuum, 1987), *Anti-Oedipus* and *What is Philosophy?*.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Dardel, *L’Homme et la terre*, Paris: éditions du CTHS, 1990, p. 50: “la réalité géographique agit sur l’homme par un éveil de la conscience.”

“How does it come about that creativity, rooted in the nature of mankind which is the same, has given birth to artistic products that differ according to locality?”<sup>14</sup>

This means, for both philosophers, that a given territory is a culture per se. For an artist, the relationship to a place is mediated by a relationship to the temporality inhabiting them and that they inhabit, and to the community of the human beings they belong. In other words, the perception by the artist of this world is mediated by inhabiting a place spatially and temporally. That accounts for the importance of the body.

Deleuze and Guattari conceive the creative approach of an artist as an act taking place “in the relationship of territory and the earth.”<sup>15</sup>

The integration of the production of the artist takes place in a relationship to a given place, to a singular culture, i.e. to a topographic writing depending on the reading performed by the men and women inhabiting this space. A place, like a landscape, exists only in the conscience of those for whom it exists. Conversely, the thinking does not occur outside a place.

Therefore, in the case of Bai-ho (fig. 1), Chen Shih-hsien does not calligraphy the concrete and immediate meaning of the name of Bai-ho, his topographic writing does not refer to a “white river”, but to the pond of the blooming lotuses composing Bai-ho’s landscape, and immediately emerging in his mind when thinking of Bai-ho.

### **Territory, art, and the people**

But what is quite striking too is that Chen Shih-Hsien does not simply calligraphy places, such as Bai-ho or Tugou, he calligraphies the people living in these territories. That is why he calligraphies *Tainan ren* 台南人, “the people of Tainan” (fig. 2), or *Xinying ren* 新營人, “the people of Xinying”, etc. (fig. 10). This implies that Chen Shih-Hsien tells the story not only of a territory, but of the people inhabiting it, and he highlights the relationship between the inhabitants and the territory. That is why he calligraphies precise places.

For “the people of Tainan” (fig. 9), Chen Shih-Hsien explains:

“Tainan is the former name of Taiwan. By giving the shape of Taiwan to the writing of Tainan means expressing the culture of Taiwan represented in it.

The colour red stands for phoenix tree flower.”台灣是台南的舊名，把台

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<sup>14</sup> Tetsuro Watsuji, *A Climate. A Philosophical Study*, translated by Geoffrey Bownas, Tokyo, Japanese National Commission for Unesco, Ministry of Education, 1961, p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson, Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 (*Qu'est-ce que la philosophie*, Paris, Minuit, 1991), p. 85.

南書寫成台灣的樣子，因為這是台灣文化的代表。紅色是鳳凰花的顏色。



Fig. 9: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Tainan ren*, printed on a schoolbag. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

In the external shape of *Tainan ren*, the beholder effectively sees the outlines of the island of Taiwan. But the right stroke of *ren*, the *pie*, is written towards the South-East of the island, as if Tainan, as the centre of Taiwan, intended to spread out into the sea. This stroke, belonging to the character *ren*, “human being”, establishes a link between Tainan and the island of Taiwan, but also between Tainan and the outside world.

It implies that a circumscribed and identified territory, by means of a specific place's name and graphic expression, can evolve into an unlimited space. Tainan can be link with the globalised world directly, and in its own right.

This has political implications: in this graphic expression, 1/ Tainan appears the capital city of an independent territory; 2/ Tainan symbolises the whole territory of Taiwan as an ancient capital; 3/ Tainan-Taiwan does not need to refer to anything else than the island by itself to connect to the whole world.

Although, following philosopher Roger-Pol Droit, “Globalisation is a westernization of the world”,<sup>16</sup> here, in the case of this calligraphy of the name and of the place of Tainan, the cultural spreading out of Taiwan and of Tainan induced by the graphic red stroke is not related to the westernization of the world.

Xinying 新營 (fig. 10) provides another example: it is the name of a district North of Tainan.

<sup>16</sup> Roger-Pol Droit, *L'Occident expliqué à tout le monde*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, p. 24 : “La “mondialisation” est une “occidentalisation” du monde”.



Fig. 10: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Xinying ren*, printed on a schoolbag. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

Chen Shih-Hsien explains:

“In the old days, Xinying was a place where people and their horses would meet or stay for the night. That is why the lines unite and expand in all directions.” 新營古時是各地來此聚集的八方人與馬，相逢或夜宿之處。故線條四處延伸與匯集！

The name of Xinying is composed of two characters, with the addition of the character *ren*, “human being”, but the brushstrokes seem to construct a unique item: the last stroke of the first character, on the left, reaches the first stroke of the last character, on the right, down in the middle of the name. The effect of the written form recalls two hands reaching out to each other. The idea of Xinying being a meeting place is clearly rendered.

Here the artist emphasises the cultural and social value of the place of Xinying.



Fig. 11: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Guanmiao*, printed on a schoolbag. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

For Guanmiao 關廟 (fig. 11), a district South-East of Tainan, Chen Shih-Hsien asserts:

“The main belief in Guanmiao is Duke Guan. His eyebrows go in all directions, his beard float in the wind, and his face is reddish. The round point on the temple character suggests [baseball player’s] Wang Jianmin’s ball, the thin moon character refers to Guanmiao’s noodles.” 關廟的主要信仰是關公。眉毛橫豎，鬚鬚飄動，臉色紅通通。廟的圓點是王建民的伸卡球，月字細，是關廟麵。

Duke Guan is Guan Yu (?-219) of the Three Kingdoms (222-265), honoured as the divinity of war, of wealth, and of culture. Duke Guan is a such a powerful divinity (fig. 6) that an important district has been named after him!



Fig. 12: A picture of Duke Guan in Guanmiao's Duke Guan Temple.

In Guanmiao's graphic writing, Chen Shih-Hsien pieces together the cultural and religious aspects of the place (duke Guan, the noodles), and the contemporary engagement in sport that characterises this district.

These examples clearly show that Chen's artistic expressions are linked to the territory of Tainan, and they evidence the political, social, religious, cultural stakes that arise from the relationships between them. Above all, they refer to men and women with their social practices and representations, at the core of the logic of territoriality.

Another aspect of Chen Shih-hsien's territorial calligraphy is the relationship with the specific inhabitants of the area of Tainan. The former inhabitants of the region did not belong to the Han culture: they were Austronesians. Some groups still live in the area of Tainan, such as the Siraya.



Fig. 13: Chen Shih-hsien, calligraphy of *Kabuasua tribal cotton (Jibeishua buluo)*, in the Siraya territory, 2003. Picture ©Chen Shih-hsien.

In 2003, Chen Shih-hsien created a calligraphy for an annual event occurring in the Siraya territory, around the blooming of the cotton flowers in spring. It was the second occasion he calligraphied “territorial writing” (*dizhi shufa*).<sup>17</sup>

Actually, he wrote 吉貝婁, *ji, bei, shua*, the transliteration of the Siraya name Kabuasua, which is a place where the Siraya live, close to Tainan. The meaning of this place’s name is “tribal cotton”. The Chinese transliteration of Kabuasua is followed by *buluo*, “tribe” or “tribal”.

Chen Shih-hsien provides this explanation:

“The three characters of *ji bei shua* form the name of the place where the Siraya group live, in the mountains East of Tainan, [they were made] for the full blooming of their tribal cotton. *Ji*, “lucky”, refers to the stems of the cotton flowers, *bei*, “cawrie”, refers to the funds inside the group, *shua*, “play”, to the quiet and dynamic appearance of the cotton flowers”.

吉貝婁 三個字 是台南東山的西拉雅族的住居地，因為開滿木棉花的部落！吉是木棉花的樹幹，貝是族裡面款款的了、婁是木棉花平動的姿態。

<sup>17</sup> His first occasion was in 1999, for a Festival of Blooming Lotuses in Bai-ho (*Baihe lianbua jie* 白河蓮花節).

The three characters *ji bei shua*, "Kabuasua", are written in a different style than the one used for *buluo*, "tribe". The style used for "tribe" is the standard regular script, following the models of Tang dynasty, whereas "Kabuasua" is written by means of a combination of seal script and of purposefully awkward regular script. The effect is "Kabuasua" is immediately visible, and it stands out in relation to the last two characters, *buluo*. Thus, the writing itself is enough to visually stress the name of the place and the relationship with the people living in it: the middle character, *shua* 耍, looks like someone dancing, especially because in the lower part of the character, 女, which means "female", the horizontal stroke is quite long, and it looks like a woman opening her arms and dancing airily, and, who knows, she may be wearing cotton clothes!

Calligraphy as a modern art has tried to renew the tradition in many ways. One of them was to find a new inspiration in going back to the pictorial origin of Chinese writing (*tu* 圖 "motive", and *wen* 文, "vein, culture")<sup>18</sup>: after all, the first category of Chinese characters are called "pictographs" (*xiangxingzi* 象形字 "characters imitating the form").<sup>19</sup> This is how modern Japanese calligraphers revisited traditional Chinese calligraphy at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese calligraphers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> Chen Shih-hsien also endorses this renewal of the tradition, when he uses colours for instance. But what is unique in Chen's creation is his quest for universality: it is not necessary to be able to read Chinese characters to understand his "topographic writings". Thus, anyone can recognise the shape of the island of Taiwan in his writing of Tainan, and can grasp the meaning of a red stroke shooting from it, into the ocean. Therefore, although for art historian Hans Belting:

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<sup>18</sup> I wish to thank my discussant, Prof. Lin Chi-Ming, former Director of Tai-chung National Museum of Fine Arts, for having raised these questions.

<sup>19</sup> There are six categories of Chinese characters: pictographs, simple ideographs, compound ideographs, picto or ideo-phonographs, borrowings, and derivative cognates.

<sup>20</sup> On modern Japanese calligraphy, see Francette Delaleu, "Japanese Avant-Garde Calligraphy. Its Genesis at a Glance" (*Riben qianwei shufa tanguan* 日本前衛書法探觀), *The International Symposium Word and Writing*, pp. 79-109; on Modern Taiwanese calligraphy, see Cheng Huei-Mei 鄭惠美, "Significant Leap of Calligraphy---Cooked (Mature) Calligraphy of the Palace Museum vs. Raw (Budding) Calligraphy of TFAM (*Shufa yuejie---Gugong bonnyuan shou shufa vs TFAM sheng shufa* 書法越界---故宮博物院熟書法 vs TFAM 生書法), *The International Symposium Word and Writing*, pp. 110-143 ; on modern Chinese calligraphy, see Yang Yingshi 楊應時, "The New Artistic Trend of China Mainland 'Modern Calligraphy', Retrospect and Prospect" (*Zhongguo Dalu 'xiandai shufa' yishu xinchao huigu yu zhanwang* 中國大陸現代書法藝術新潮回顧與展望), 2001 *Modern Calligraphy New Prospect. Conference on Scholarly Bilateral Exchanges* (2001 *xiandai shufa xin zhanwang. Liang'an xueshu jiaoliu yantaohui* 2001 現代書法新展望---兩岸學術交流研討會), Tai-chung: Taiwan National Museum of Fine Arts, 2002, pp. 35-55.

“Even in a world of disappearing boundaries, individual positions are still rooted in and limited by particular cultural traditions”.<sup>21</sup>

But this limitation is not negative, it can be resourceful as it gives birth to creativity, especially when art and life are intertwined. Hans Belting adds:

“The old antagonism between art and life has been defused, precisely because art has lost its secure frontiers against other media, visual and linguistic, and is instead understood as one of various systems of explaining and representing the world.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, art has challenges to take up today. Generally, whether through art destined to for galleries and museums, or art aimed at a broader popular audience (often called public art), today’s artists afford a higher degree of public visibility than in earlier decades.

Chen Shih-Hsien is aware of this recent feature: that is why he produces students’ schoolbags, or caps, bearing his topographic calligraphies (fig. 3, 9, 10, 11). In doing so, he publicises all the aspects underlined above outside Tainan, and he shows them to a large audience, who is no specialist of calligraphy, and not even especially interested in art. But because of their artistic and narrative appeal, these artworks catch the attention of the audience and encourage the beholders to think about the place they live in, and their relationship to it.

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<sup>21</sup> Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, translated by Christopher S. Wood, Chicago, 1987, p. xii.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xi.