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## M/C Journal, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2013) - 'remix'

### Drawing the Line: Chinese Calligraphy, Cultural Materialisms and the "Remixing of Remix"

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Patrick Leslie West, Cher Coad

Western notions of authors' Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs), as expressed within copyright law, maintain a potentially fraught relationship with a range of philosophical and theoretical positions on writing and authorship that have developed within contemporary Western thinking. For Roland Barthes, authorship is compromised, de-identified and multiplied by the very nature of writing: 'Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (142). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari follow a related line of thought in *A Thousand Plateaus*: 'Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency' (11). Similarly, in *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida suggests that 'Writing is that forgetting of the self, that exteriorization, the contrary of the interiorizing memory' (24).

To the extent that these philosophical and theoretical positions emerge within the practices of creative writers as remixes of appropriation, homage and/or pastiche, prima facie they problematize the commercial rights of writers as outlined in law. The case of Kathy Acker often comes up in such discussions. Acker's 1984 novel *Blood and Guts in High School*, for example, incorporates techniques that have attracted the charge of plagiarism as this term is commonly defined. (Peter Wollen notes this in his aptly named essay 'Death [and Life] of the Author.')

For texts like Acker's, the comeback against charges of plagiarism usually involves underscoring the quotient of creativity involved in the re-combination or 'remixing' of the parts of the original texts. (Pure repetition would, it would seem, be much harder to defend.) 'Plagiarism', so-called, was simply one element of Acker's writing technique; Robert Lort nuances plagiarism as it applies to Acker as 'pseudo-plagiarism'. According to Wollen, 'as she always argued, it wasn't really plagiarism because she was quite open about what she did.' As we shall demonstrate in more detail later on, however, there is another and, we suggest, more convincing reason why Acker's work 'wasn't really plagiarism.' This relates to her conscious interest in calligraphy and to her (perhaps unconscious) appropriation of a certain strand of Chinese philosophy.

All the same, within the Western context, the consistent enforcement of copyright law guarantees the rights of authors to control the distribution of their own work and thus its monetised value. The author may be 'dead' in writing—just the faintest trace of remixed textuality—but he/she is very much 'alive' as in recognised at law. The model of the author as free-standing citizen (as a defined legal entity) that copyright law employs is unlikely to be significantly eroded by the textual practices of authors who tarry artistically in the 'de-authored territories' mapped by figures like Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, and Derrida.

Crucially, disputes concerning copyright law and the ethics of remix are resolved, within the Western context, at the intersection of relatively autonomous creative and legal domains. In the West, it is seen that these two domains are related within the one social fabric; each nuances the other (as Acker's example shows in the simultaneity of her legal/commercial status as an author and her artistic practice as a 'remixer' of the original works of other authors). Legal and writing issues co-exist even as they fray each other's boundaries. And in Western countries there is force to the law's operations.

However, the same cannot be said of the situation with respect to copyright law in China. Chinese artists are traditionally regarded as being aloof from mundane legal and commercial matters, with the consequence that the creative and the legal domains tend to 'miss each

other' within the fabric of Chinese society. To this extent, the efficacy of the law is muted in China when it comes into contact with circumstances of authorship, writing, originality and creativity. (In saying this though, we do not wish to fall into the trap of cultural essentialism: in this article, 'China' and 'The West' are placeholders for variant cultural tendencies—clustered, perhaps, around China and its disputed territories such as Taiwan on the one hand, and around America on the other—rather than homogeneous national/cultural blocs.)

Since China opened its system to Western capitalist economic activity in the 1980s, an ongoing criticism, sourced mainly out of the West, has been that the country lacks proper respect for notions of authorship and, more directly, for authorship's derivative: copyright law. Tellingly, it took almost ten years of fierce negotiations between elements of the capitalist lobby in China and the Legislative Bureau to make the Seventh National People's Congress pass the first Copyright Law of the People's Republic of China on 7 September 1990. A law is one thing though, and adherence to the law is another. Jayanthi Iyengar of *Asia Times Online* reports that 'the US government estimates that piracy within China [of all types of products] costs American companies \$20-24 billion a year in damages.... If one includes European and Japanese firms, the losses on account of Chinese piracy is in excess of \$50 billion annually.' In 2008, the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) reported that more than 99% of all music files in China are pirated. In the same year, Cara Anna wrote in *The Seattle Times* that, in desperation at the extent of Chinese infringement of its Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs), Microsoft has deployed an anti-piracy tactic that blacks out the screens of computers detected running a fake copy of Windows. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has filed complaints from many countries against China over IPRs. Iyengar also reports that, under such pressure, the State Intellectual Property Office in Beijing has vowed it will continue to reinforce awareness of IPRs in order to better ensure their protection. Still, from the Western perspective at least, progress on this extremely contentious issue has been excruciatingly slow.

Such a situation in respect of Chinese IPRs, however, should not lead to the conclusion that China simply needs to catch up with the more 'morally advanced' West. Rather, the problematic relations of the law and of creativity in China allow one to discern, and to trace through ancient Chinese history and philosophy, a different approach to remix that does not come into view so easily within Western countries.

Different materialisms of writing and authorship come into play across global space, with different effects. The resistance to both the introduction and the policing of copyright law in China is, we think, the sign of a culture that retains something related to authorship and creativity that Western culture only loosely holds onto. It provides a different way of looking at remix, in the guise of what the West would tend to label plagiarism, as a practice, especially, of creativity. The 'death' of the author in China at law (the failure to legislate and/or police his/her rights) brings the author, as we will argue, 'alive' in the writing. Remix as anonymous composition (citing Barthes) becomes, in the Chinese example, remix as creative expression of singular feelings—albeit remix set adrift from the law.

More concretely, our example of the Chinese writer/writing takes remix to its limit as a practice of repetition without variation—what the West would be likely to call plagiarism. Calligraphy is key to this. Of course, calligraphy is not the full extent of Chinese writing practice—not all writing is calligraphic strictly speaking. But all calligraphy is writing, and in this it influences the ethics of Chinese writing, whether character-based or otherwise, more generally. We will have more to say about the 'pictorial' material aspect of Chinese writing later on.

In traditional Chinese culture, writing is regarded as a technical practice perfected through reproduction. Chinese calligraphy (visual writing) is learnt through exhaustively tracing and copying the style of the master calligrapher. We are tempted to say that what is at stake in Chinese remix/calligraphy is 'the difference that cannot be helped:' that is, the more one tries, as it were, to repeat, the more repetition becomes impossible. In part, this is explained by the interplay of *Qing* 情 ('feelings') and *Yun* 韵 ('composed body movements').

Now, the order of the characters—*Qing* 情 ('feelings') before *Yun* 韵 ('composed body movements')—suggests that *Qing* creates and supports *Yun*. To this extent, what we have here is something akin to a Western understanding of creative writing (of the creativity of writing) in which individual and singular feelings are given expression in the very movement of the writing itself (through the bodily actions of the writer). In fact though, the Chinese case is more complicated than this, for the apprenticeship model of Chinese calligraphy cultivates a *two-way interplay* of *Qing* 情 ('feelings') and *Yun* 韵 ('composed body movements'). More directly, the 'composed body movements' that one learns from the master calligrapher help compose one's own 'feelings'. The very repetition of the master's work (its remixing, as it were...) enables the creativity of the apprentice.

If this model of creativity is found somewhat distasteful from a Western perspective (that is, if it is seen to be too restrictive of originality) then that is because such a view, we think, depends upon a cultural misunderstanding that we will try to clear up here. To wit, the so-called Confucian model of rote learning that is more-or-less frowned upon in the West is not, at least not in the debased form that it adopts in Western stereotypes, the philosophy active in the case of Chinese calligraphy. That philosophy is Taoism. As Wing-Tsit Chan elucidates, 'by opposing Confucian conformity with non-conformity and Confucian worldliness with a transcendental spirit, Taoism is a severe critic of Confucianism' (136). As we will show in a moment, Chinese calligraphy exemplifies this special kind of Taoist non-conformity (in which, as Philip J. Ivanhoe limns it, 'one must unweave the social fabric'). Chan again: 'As the way of life, [Taoism] denotes simplicity, spontaneity, tranquility, weakness, and most important of all, non-action (*wu-wei*). By the latter is not meant literally "inactivity" but rather "taking no action that is contrary to Nature"—in other words, letting Nature take its own course' (136). Thus, this is a philosophy of 'weakness' that is neither 'negativism' nor 'absolute quietism' (137).

Taoism's supposed weakness is rather a certain form of strength, of (in the fullest sense) creative possibilities, which comes about through deference to the way of Nature. 'Hold fast to the great form (Tao), / And all the world will come' illustrates this aspect of Taoism in its major philosophical tract, *The Lao Tzu (Tao-Te Ching)* or *The Classic of the Way and its Virtue* (section 35, Chan 157). The guiding principle is one of deference to the original (way, Nature or Tao) as a strategy of an expression (of self) that goes beyond the original. *The Lao Tzu* is full of cryptic, metaphoric expressions of this idea: 'The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. / The pursuit of Tao is to decrease day after day. / It is to decrease and further decrease until one reaches the point of taking no action. / No action is undertaken, and yet nothing is left undone' (section 48, Chan 162).

Similarly,

The female always overcomes the male by tranquility, / And by tranquility she is underneath. / A big state can take over a small state if it places itself below the small state; / And the small state can take over a big state if it places itself below the big state. / Thus some, by placing themselves below, take over (others), / And some, by being (naturally) low, take over (other states) (section 61, Chan 168).

In Taoism, it is only by (apparent) weakness and (apparent) in-action that 'nothing is left undone' and 'states' are taken over.

The two-way interplay of *Qing* 情 ('feelings') and *Yun* 韵 ('composed body movements'), whereby the apprentice copies the master, aligns with this key element of Taoism. Here is the linkage between calligraphy and Taoism. The master's work is Tao, Nature or the way: 'Hold fast to the great form (Tao), / And all the world will come' (section 35, Chan 157). The apprentice's calligraphy is 'all the world' ('all the world' being, ultimately in this context, *Qing* 情 ['feelings']).

Indeed, Taoism itself is a subtle philosophy of learning (of apprenticeship to a master), unlike Confucianism, which Chan characterises as a doctrine of 'social order' (of servitude to a master) (136). "'Learn not learn'" is how Wang Pi, as quoted by Chan (note 121, 170), understands what he himself (Chan) translates as 'He learns to be unlearned' (section 64, 170). *In unlearning one learns what cannot be taught*: this is, we suggest, a remarkable definition of creativity, which also avoids falling into the trap of asserting a one-to-one equivalence between (unlearnt) originality and creativity, for there is both learning and creativity in this Taoist paradox of pedagogy. On this, Michael Meehan points out that 'originality is an over-rated and misguided concept in many ways.' (There is even a sense in which, through its deliberate repetition, *The Lao Tzu teaches itself*, traces over itself in 'self-plagiarising' fashion, as if it were reflecting on the re-tracings of calligraphic pedagogy. Chan notes just how deliberate this is: 'Since in ancient times books consisted of bamboo or wooden slabs containing some twenty characters each, it was not easy for these sentences... to be added by mistake.... Repetitions are found in more than one place' [note 102, 166].)

Thinking of Kathy Acker too as a learner, Peter Wollen's observation that she 'incorporated calligraphy... in her books' and 'was deeply committed to [the] avant-garde tradition, a tradition which was much stronger in the visual arts' creates a highly suggestive connection between Acker's work and Taoism. The Taoist model for learning calligraphy as, precisely, visual art—in which copying subtends creativity—serves to shift Acker away from a Barthesian or Derridean framework and into a Taoist context in which adherence to another's form (as 'un-learnt learning') creatively unravels so-called plagiarism from the inside. Acker's conscious interest in calligraphy is shown by its prevalence in *Blood and Guts in High School*. Edward S. Robinson identifies this text as part of her 'middle phase', which 'saw the introduction of illustrations and diagrams to create multimedia texts with a collage-like feel' (154). To our knowledge, Acker never critically reflected upon her own calligraphic practices; perhaps if she had, she would have troubled what we see as a blindspot in critics' interpretations of her work. To wit, whenever calligraphy is mentioned in criticism on Acker, it tends to be deployed merely as an example of her cut-up technique and never analysed for its effects in its own cultural, philosophical and material specificity.

(Interestingly, if the words of Chinese photographer Liu Zheng are any guide, the Taoism we're identifying in calligraphy has also worked its way into other forms of Chinese visual art: she refers to 'loving photographic details and cameras' with the very Taoist term, 'lowly' 低级 [Three Shadows Photography Art Centre 187].)

Being 'lowly', 'feminine' or 'underneath' has power as a radical way of learning.

We mentioned above that Taoism is very metaphoric. As the co-writer of this paper Cher Coad recalls from her calligraphy classes, students in China grow up with a metaphoric proverb clearly inspired by Lao Tzu's Taoist philosophy of learning: 'Learning shall never stop. Black comes from blue, but is more than the blue.'

'Black comes from blue, but is more than the blue.' What could this mean?

Before answering this question with recourse to two Western notions that, we hope, will further effect (building on Acker's example) a rapprochement between Chinese and Western ways of thinking (be they nationally based or not), we reiterate that the infringement of Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) in China should not be viewed only as an egregious denial of universally accepted law. Rather, whatever else it may be, we see it as the shadow in the commercial realm—mixed through with all the complexities of Chinese tradition, history and cultural difference, and most particularly of the Taoist strand within Confucianism—of the never-quite-perfect copying of calligraphic writing/remixing. More generally, the re-examination of stereotypical assumptions about Chinese culture cues a re-examination of the meaning behind the copying of products and technology in contemporary, industrialised China.

So, 'Black comes from blue, but is more than the blue.' What is this 'more than the blue of

black'? Or put differently, why is calligraphic writing, as learnt from the master, always infused with the singular feelings of the (apprentice) writer? The work of Deleuze, Guattari and Claire Parnet provides two possible responses.

In *On the Line*, Deleuze and Guattari (and Deleuze in co-authorship with Parnet) author a number of comments that support the conception we are attempting to develop concerning the lines of Chinese calligraphy. A line, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is always a line of lines ('Line of chance, line of hips, line of flight' [57]). In the section of *On the Line* entitled 'Politics', Deleuze and Parnet outline the impossibility of any line being just one line. If life is a line (as it is said, you throw someone a life line), then 'We have as many entangled lines in our lives as there are in the palm of a hand' (71). Of any (hypothetical) single line it can be said that other lines emerge: 'Black comes from blue, but is more than the blue.' The feelings of the apprentice calligrapher (his/her multiple lines) emerge through the repeated copying of the lines and composed body movements of the master.

The Deleuzian notion of repetition takes this idea further. Repetitive Chinese calligraphy clearly indexes what Claire Colebrook refers to as 'Deleuze's concept of *eternal return*. The *only* thing that is repeated or returns is difference; no two moments of life can be the same. By virtue of the flow of time, any repeated event is necessarily different (even if different only to the extent that it has a predecessor)' (121). Now, it might be objected that Chinese calligraphic practices, because of the substantially ideographic nature of Chinese writing (see Kristeva 72-81), allow for material mutations that can find no purchase in Western, alphabetical systems of writing. But the materiality of *time* that Colebrook refers to as part of her engagement with Deleuzian non-repetitious (untimely) repetition guarantees the materiality of *all* modes of writing. Furthermore, Julia Kristeva notes that, with any form of language, one cannot leave 'the realm of materialism' (6) and Adrian Miles, in his article 'Virtual Actual: Hypertext as Material Writing,' sees the apparently very 'unmaterial' writing of hypertext 'as an embodied activity that has its own particular affordances and possibilities—its own constraints and local actualisations' (1-2). Calligraphic repetition of the master's model creates the apprentice's feelings as (inevitable) difference.

In this then, the learning by the Chinese apprentice of the lines of the master's calligraphy challenges international (both Western and non-Western) artists of writing to 'remix remix' as a matter—as a materialisation—of the line. Not the line as a self-identical entity of writing that only goes to make up writing more generally; rather, lines as a materialisation of lines within lines within lines. More self-reflexively, even the collaborative enterprise of this article, co-authored as it is by a woman of Chinese ethnicity and a white Australian man, suggests a remixing of writing through, beneath and over each other's lines.

*Yun* 韵 ('composed body movements') expresses and maximises *Qing* 情 ('feelings'). Taoist 'un-learnt learning' generates remix as the singular creativity of the writer. Writers get into a blue with the line—paint it, black.

Of course, these ideas won't and shouldn't make copyright infringement (or associated legalities) redundant notions. But in exposing the cultural relativisms often buried within the deployment of this and related terms, the idea of lines of lines far exceeds a merely formalistic practice (one cut off from the materialities of culture) and rather suggests a mode of non-repetitious repetition in contact with all of the elements of culture (of history, of society, of politics, of bodies...) wherever these may be found, and whatever their state of becoming. In this way, remix re-creates the depths of culture even as it stirs up its surfaces of writing.

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