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## Chinese Calligraphy: An American Chinese's Perspective

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# CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

## An American Chinese's Perspective

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts  
in Humanities and Cultural Studies

By  
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May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

Humanities is the study of culture, history, literature and philosophy. Through a journey of self-revelation and research, Chinese calligraphy will be introduced as more than just a form of art as Westerners see it. Having a basic practical knowledge of Calligraphy, I've researched and embellished upon that knowledge. Calligraphy is a long known form of writing, with many styles. Calligraphers from Ancient China reveal their feelings that it is an expression of who they are.

## Content

<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>II. The Beginnings</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>III. The Beginning of My Understanding</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>IV. The Styles</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>V. My Style of Writing</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>VI. Tools and Methods</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>VII. My Use of The Tools</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>VIII. More Than Art</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>IX. Conclusion</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>X. Citations</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>XI. My Project</b>	<b>23</b>

## Introduction

### Chinese Calligraphy: An American Chinese's Perspective

In January of 2014, writing my Humanities thesis became a project for enhancing my knowledge of Chinese Calligraphy. Although I feel that I am Chinese, I am not. I have studied the language and found that calligraphy is one of the most misunderstood parts of the Chinese language. In order for the reader to understand how my love for Chinese and understanding of calligraphy came about one would need to hear a little bit about my history.

In June of 1988, I traveled from Andrews University in Michigan to Pingtung, Taiwan as a student missionary. After arriving, as part of the program, I took a class, once a week for two hours studying the traditional “ju yin fu how” phonetical system used in Taiwan. I never thought of myself as particularly, talented with languages. I quickly got frustrated trying to master the sounds that I thought were the same. I gave up at the beginning of the first non phonics based lesson; “this is a pen” “what is this” and “what is that.” Instead I would watch Chinese TV and found that I was hearing the same sounds over and over. Once I started researching and asking, “What does that mean?” my vocabulary grew exponentially. Within the first year I was speaking fluently and able to understand more than my boss, (who had been there for 15 years).

I married a Chinese man, had four children and lived in Taiwan for 20 years. During this time I picked up not only how to listen and speak the language but also studied on my own how to read and write. It helped when my children started going to school because already being able to read more than they, I could help them with their homework while learning at the same time. That was the first time I came in contact with Chinese

calligraphy. It was part of their studies at school. I asked friends why they studied this form of writing. The answer did not feel like an answer. I was told that although it is an Art form, it is part of the curriculum, training on the correct form of writing. Students are taught the correct positioning of their hands, body, the paper and the brush and then the correct manner of placement of the character on the paper. "There is more to it than that"; my friends told me. It is the words, they hold meaning and every person interprets them differently so their writing is different. It is an extension of the writer through their language or the language through the person. I understood what was said but could not truly grasp what it meant as I did not practice calligraphy.

Even now living back in the United States I have not given up my study of the language nor my fascination with calligraphy. I find myself buying the prefilled calligraphy pens and practicing my writing.

I will endeavor to bring calligraphy to life by starting with the origins of the language, the different styles, the tools used and the method of study, showing how even with my limited knowledge of the language and culture I came to understand that it is an integral part of the language.

## THE BEGINNINGS

Any study about Chinese history or Chinese Calligraphy will at some point reference the Oracle bones. To the Chinese people and language it is an important landmark. It is important because it helps to trace the longevity of the Chinese language. The Oracle bones are artifacts found and dated from around the late Shang Dynasty somewhere around 1200 BC (Chen).



Figure 1 Oracle Bone Ventral Turtle Shell. Book Review: *Oracle Bones*. *Connect Shore*, July 13, 2014. Web. March 15, 2014.

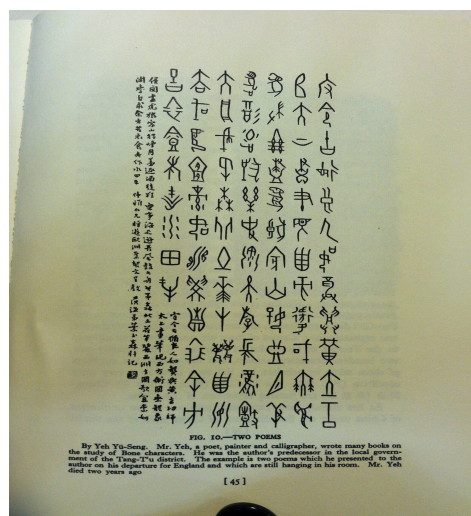


Figure 2 Yu-Seng Yeh, Oracle Bone Script, (Yee 45).

Characters were inscribed on animal bones; turtle shells, ox, pig or sheep scapula. One or more holes were bored into the back and cracks would appear as a hot metal rod was applied to the hole(s) (Sullivan 16). The cracks were then read to give the seeker knowledge of a certain situation. Although during the Bronze Age there were written characters, the Oracle Bones were the earliest evidence of the Chinese language available in large enough quantities for historians to study extensively. Even though these bones were a way to record information and keep town records, they were mainly used in divination.

“The vast majority records the pyromantic divinations of the royal house of the late Shang dynasty” (China).

### The Beginning of My Understanding

The more I learned about the Chinese language the more questions I had. One of the first questions was how old the language is and which language came first: Chinese, Japanese or Korean. The Chinese told me that of course Chinese came before the other two languages and that the proof of that lies in history. The history of the Chinese language I was told goes back 5000 years. There are pottery, urns, and other artifacts that have Chinese writing in them from the Bronze Age, which dates back to 1500 BC. That only provides for about 3500 years or so of time; bringing into question the other 1500 years. It was pointed out that the language did not just appear at that time. The building of the language and its written form accounts for the remaining time.

Studying the Chinese language is similar to studying two different languages. There is the conversational method where learning to read and write is not as important as speaking and listening. The Chinese characters are not connected to their phonetical sounds and so learning the language in totality means learning it two separate times and ways. A student may learn to read and write the language without learning conversation and vice versa.

Having watched Chinese TV programs and hearing the same phrase; “ta suaw, nee suaw, wuo suaw”, I sought out what the meaning of “suaw” was. The meaning of “suaw” was “to say.” After that I would hear words in the market, with my Bible students, and among friends repeated again and again. Those were the words that I learned the fastest. It was not long before I realized that some of the first words that I was learning were those used in my “family” circle; mama, baba, che (car), lauw shr (teacher), and wei jia (go home).



## THE STYLES



Figure 3 Calligraphic Art, Freer/Sackler (China's).

Following the Oracle Bones, Chinese script, characters and the method of writing them out changed down through the ages. Around 213 B.C., “the Prime Minister Li Szu drew up an official index of characters and unified the written form for the use of scholars” “and contained more than 3,000 characters”(Ebrey). This style was known as the Chuan Style (Seal Style), encompassing both large and small seal styles. This style is what is seen on Chinese seals or stamps.

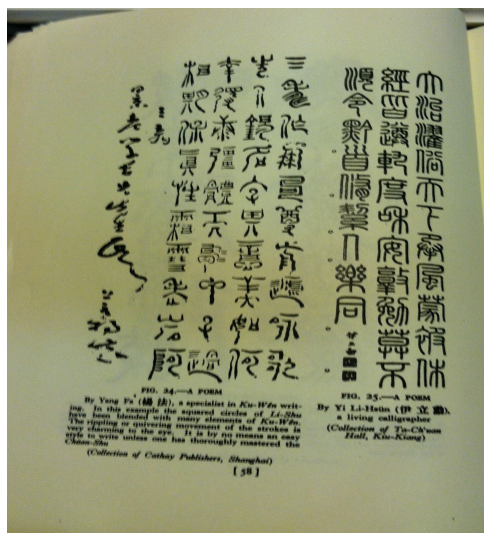


Figure 4 Yang Fa and Yi Li-Hsun, Chuan Style, (Yee 58)



Figure 5 Hsu Hsuan & Li Yang-Ping, Chuan Style, (Yee 54).

Li Shu (Official Style) was founded during the Qin dynasty. Cheng Miao (Ebrey) was thrown into jail because he could not finish his workload for the emperor on time and he

blamed it on the time consuming Chuan Style. During his jail time he created Li Shu which was easier to write out.

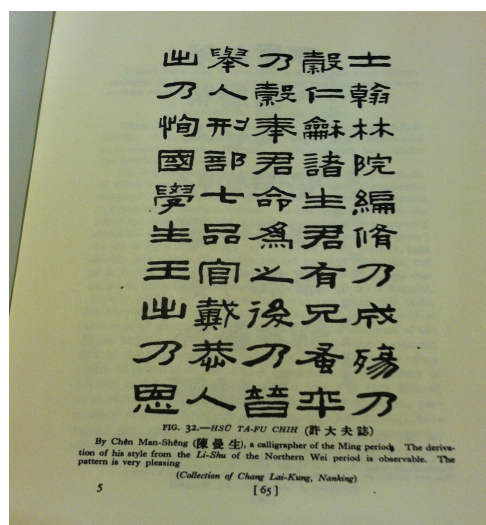
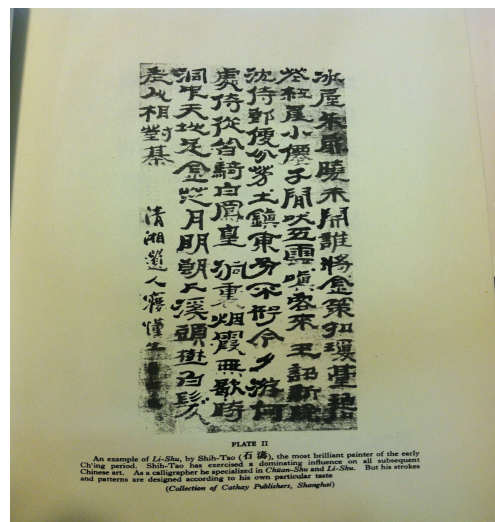


Figure 6 Shih-Tao, Li Shu, (Yee plate 11)



. Figure 7 Chen Man-Sheng, Li Shu, (Yee 65).

Kai Shu (Standard Style) invented by Zhong Yao (Ebrey) was first practiced following the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE and perfected in the mid Tang dynasty 618-907(China's). This is the most common Chinese style used in society, newspapers, computers, and textbooks, because of the ease of recognition of the characters. This is the style most students learn in school.

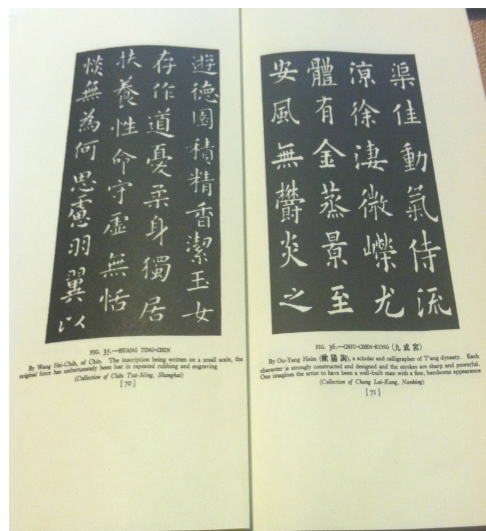


Figure 8 Wang Shi-Chih &amp; Ou-Yang Hsun, Kai Shu, (Yee 70-71).

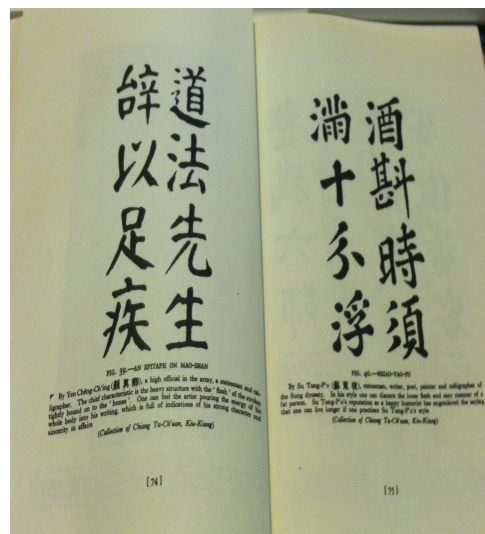


Figure 9 Yen Cheng-Ching &amp; Su Tung-Po, Kai Shu, (Yee 74-75).

Hsing Shu (Walking Style) is similar to the English cursive writing in that it is a quickened form of writing. This form started to appear in the decades after the Han dynasty (206BCE-220CE) and reached its final stage of formative development in the fourth century (China's). Even though school children first learn Kai Shu, once they have become proficient at writing it is common to evolve into using Hsing Shu.

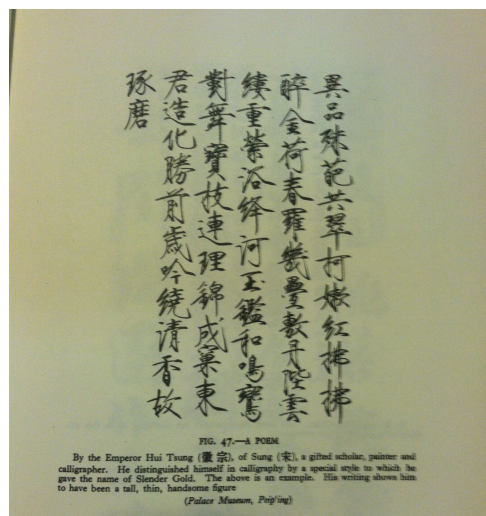


Figure 10 Emperor Hui Tsung, Hsing Shu, (Yee 83).

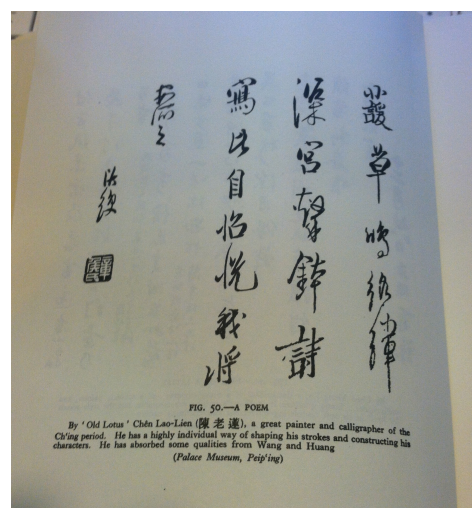


Figure 11 Chen Lao-Lien, Hsing Shu, (Yee 86).

Tsao Shu (Grass Style) seems to be an extreme form of Hsing Shu, so much so that it seems to be a totally different set of characters. This form of writing often uses the



shortened form of the characters and is so joined that it looks to be one continuous twirling line, somewhat like a worm trail. There are two different forms of the Tsao Shu; the Zhang Tsao follows Li Shu while the Jin Tsao follows Kai Shu. This style is often seen in museums, or art shows and take many years of practice. In order to use this style the person must be well versed in the method and manner of writing the Chinese character.

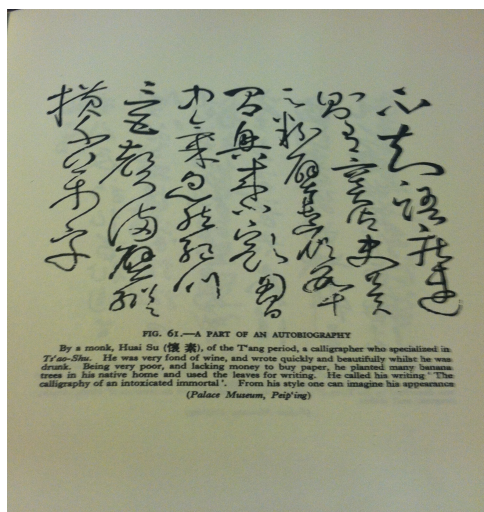


Figure 12 Huai Su, Tsao Shu, (Yee 97).

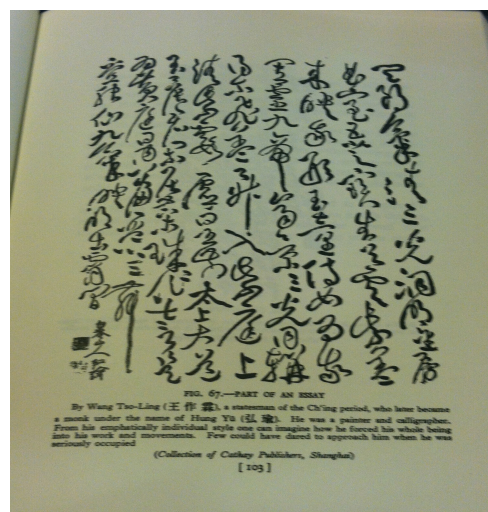


Figure 13 Wang Tso-Ling, Tsao Shu, (Yee 103).

## My Style of Writing

The next step in learning Chinese I took as a housewife and mother. As a housewife I would need to buy a certain ingredient or equipment and needed to be independent. For that independence I needed to be able to read Chinese. I would ask, what shop on what street sells what I need, then I would have to travel down the street on my scooter stopping in front of each shop to look inside to see if it might sell what I needed. This was a waste of time so I would have someone write down the main character on the store sign. Already knowing how to say the words and what they meant helped in picking up the written language much faster.

Once I started remembering the character in connection with the spoken word, I noticed that some of the same characters were used in different places. The first one that puzzled me and started me on studying the Chinese dictionary was the character “hsin” 行 because I saw it in two very different places. The first place I saw it was in the word bank 銀行 and later I saw it in the word sidewalk 人行道. I questioned why it sounded differently and meant different things. A Chinese character may have the same phonetical sound but use a different tone making it mean a different thing. That same character may have a totally different phonetical sound like the character “hsin” 行. In bank this character’s phonetical sound is “hang” (with the “ah” sounding like the noise the doctor makes you say when he looks in your mouth) and in sidewalk it is “hsin.”

As I started picking up the written character I would find that sometimes I would forget and have to re-learn certain characters. It was pointed out to me that if I wanted to remember the characters I would need to write them out multiple times. The more I wrote them out and used them the easier it was to remember them. My writing is similar to Kai

Shu, more of a block form. I would write this way so that people would not mistake my character for a different one. My students would often comment that my writing was neater than theirs. I told them that I was still in first grade whereas they had graduated to using the Hsing Shu that most Chinese use daily as it is faster.

## Tools and Methods

The tools, used by the person studying or practicing calligraphy, are usually referred to as the “Four Treasures” (China’s) including; the brush, the paper, the ink-stick, and the ink-stone. For the school aged learner it is more practical to use bottled ink so as to prevent tracking of fingerprints made by the ink dust. The brush can come in many sizes depending on the size of the character that one wishes to create. It is important to keep the brush clean and dry so that it does not harden causing difficulty writing. Traditionally, young people would use old newspaper to practice, as rice paper/calligraphy paper is expensive. The ink-stick is made of pine soot or lamp root and glue to harden it into a shape to preserve it for future use (China’s). The ink-stone is a stone with an attached reservoir to grind the ink-stick to powder and add water to create the ink. The ink is very difficult to remove from clothing and other surfaces. It is not hard to imagine that over the years parents became inventive and thought of purchasing the ink in bottled form to save the household and themselves the trouble of cleaning up behind calligraphy practice.



Figure 14. Brush, Inkstick, Rice paper, Inkstone and well, (China's).

The method of “writing” calligraphy takes time and practice to learn, sometimes decades. The brush is held vertically and the position of the hand holding it is, is as if holding a newspaper upright to read it. The forearm is not to balance on the table but to be

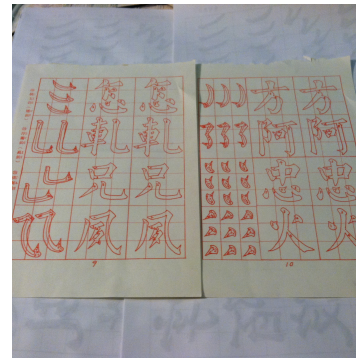
held apart. As the student advances the teacher gives a sheet of characters that the student must practice by writing over the letters that are already there. After this type of practice the student then uses trace paper and writes over the teachers writing or another calligrapher's writing.

Similar to any "skill" like piano or violin playing it takes years to exercise the muscles in the wrist, elbow and arm into the correct balance between gravity, force and control. Each person's writing develops into a different style, a personalized style. When studying the teacher may use certain descriptive phrases to help enhance the student's understanding of the stroke such as flow like the mist, quick like a woodpecker or hop like a bird. For each stroke of the brush a different amount of pressure should be exerted and the flow of the movement once learned the correct manner can be adjusted to the student's preference. Each "gesture is the spontaneous extension of the pattern of movement that" (Driscoll 6) is felt within. "The essence of beauty in writing is not found in the written word but lies in response to unlimited change" (Driscoll 1).



### My Use of The Tools

In preparing my project I purchased a brush, a bottle of “muo dzi” or ink, two different kinds of practice paper (lined and unlined), and three practice booklets.



I placed newspapers on the table that I was practicing on, put some ink in a small container, had a rinse cup, and a wad of tissue for resting the brush on. Without a teacher I had to use practice booklets that have the order of the brush stroke numbered so that I could follow the “correct” method of the stroke. After the first 30 sheets of practice the fluidity of my brushwork became smoother. My calligraphy is still in the pre-school levels of learning but I have come to appreciate the amount of control, and the time that is needed for a writer to become proficient at Calligraphy.

### More than Art

Calligraphy, as writing, is mostly seen in museums. Very seldom is it seen outside of museums. In reality it and its tools can be commonly found in many Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese homes. Any family with children that study the Chinese language or calligraphy has a set of calligraphy tools around the house. There are also probably stains from practicing it. Until I started this project I had never truly practiced calligraphy. My knowledge of it came through my children and my best friend who was an elementary school teacher. I would often question; why, how, how long will it take. In reality, even though I had only scratched the surface of knowledge about Calligraphy I came to understand that to be able to do and incorporate Calligraphy into your life is a very high calling for a Chinese person. In the beginning, it is just a lot of practice but for those that take to it and continue to practice it becomes a part of who they are. Some meditate on the character that they are to write while others concentrate on the word, the meaning within the poem they are to write and use their inner feelings while writing to create.

“Calligraphy is a mental exercise that coordinates the mind and the body” (Ebrey). Many calligraphers followed tradition in their Art but “Song scholar-artists such as Su Shi (1037-1101) and Mi Fu (1051-1107), however, were not satisfied with just following tradition, for they considered calligraphy also as a means of creative and personal expression” (Calligraphy). “Chinese calligraphy is an Oriental tradition rooted in centuries of practice. It is an art of turning square Chinese characters into expressive images by varying the speed and pressure of a pointed Chinese brush. Chinese calligraphy emphasizes more on expressing one’s emotion....calligraphy is a mental exercise that coordinates the mind and body to choose the best styling in presenting the content of the passage”

(Calligraphy). By learning different styles of calligraphy the calligrapher has a wider range to choose from when writing.

### In Conclusion

A friend was reading this and being totally unfamiliar with Chinese asked, "I still do not get it. So, what is the difference between writing and calligraphy?" I laughed because to the western world that would be the big question wouldn't it. I actually had to think about it for a second and really try to be concise in my explanation. Any person can write Chinese characters but calligraphy takes an understanding of the background of the character then using all that makes up the person, their cultural background-their family history, to write the characters with feeling. If one were a musician it would be like playing the piano, you can play by rote or play from your heart. Writing is by rote while calligraphy is writing from your heart and soul.

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## My Calligraphy

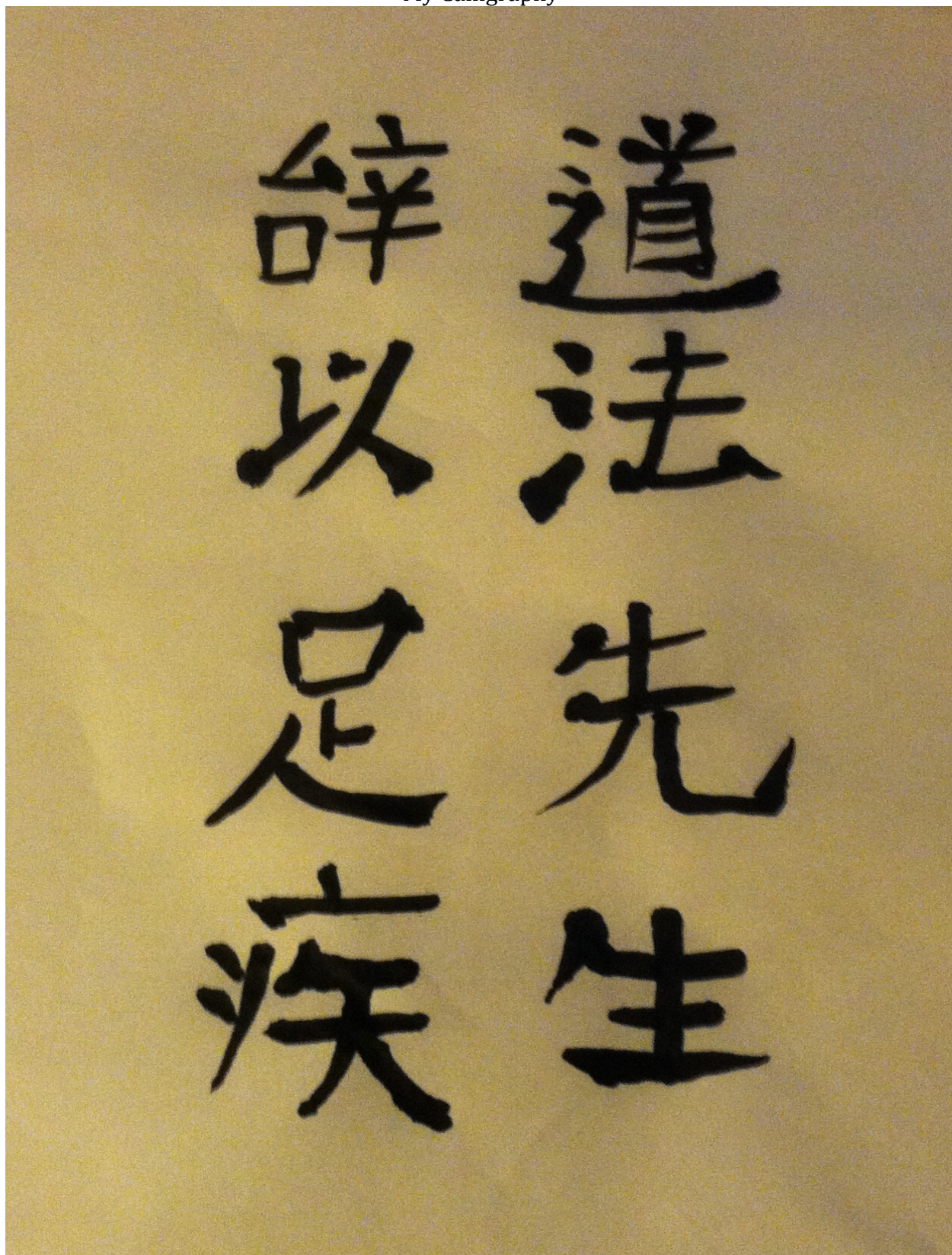


Figure 15 Bridget Duann, An Epitaph on Mao-Shan, (Yee 74)



















