6-17-2008

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Preserving the Premier’s Calligraphy at Beichuan Middle School

June 17, 2008 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | 1 comment

By Richard Kraus

The Beichuan Middle School lost a thousand students in May’s devastating Sichuan earthquake. When Premier Wen Jiabao visited the school’s temporary quarters, he wrote four characters on a blackboard to inspire the students: “distress rejuvenates a nation” (多难兴邦). After his departure, teachers and students could not bear to erase his chalk inscription, which was covered in plastic until the Sichuan Cultural Relics Bureau could devise a method for permanently preserving Wen’s handwriting.

Although Premier Wen’s chalk on a blackboard may seem difficult to preserve, China has a deeply established tradition of copying calligraphy. Many of the great works of past masters are only known by copies, often stone carvings, which astonishingly capture the most delicate brushstrokes in a medium which lasts for centuries. And newer technologies can be used to preserve Wen’s temporary inscription for future generations.

The more interesting problem is political. The propagation of calligraphy by powerful men (never women) bolsters personality cults, as I show in my book *Brushes with Power*. Calligraphy is said to reveal the inner character of a person—one can detect the virtue of a writer by the beauty of his brushstrokes. Underlings have flattered their bosses for centuries by praising their calligraphy, leading to a secondary tradition of ghost calligraphers to create suitable inscriptions for those men of power who lacked a good classical education. For the powerful, spreading calligraphy around is a way to leave visible markers of their sphere of influence. Book titles, building signs, and newspaper mastheads have all featured inscriptions where politicians use the brush to display their patronage and extend their protection.

This ancient power-calligraphy bond was initially shaken in the twentieth century as modernists questioned the traditions of literati culture. But the practice instead grew to new extremes because Mao Zedong was both a serious calligrapher and center of an unprecedented personality cult. Mao, whose distinctive writing style lives on today not only in artifacts from his day but also in a computer font inspired by it, wrote characters for causes and institutions he supported. Even those he did not often forged his calligraphy to strengthen their claims to legitimacy. Mao’s characters graced the Bank of China, People’s Daily, and Red Guard armbands. Ardently revolutionary orchardists grew apples bearing the Chairman’s calligraphy by ripening the fruit with stencils and sunlight.
The equation of good calligraphy and high moral leadership can be broken. Lin Biao, Mao’s one-time ally, produced inscriptions for the little red book of Quotations from Chairman Mao and for a multitude of Mao statues around the nation. After Lin’s shocking death in 1971, his characters were physically stripped from the plinths of the Mao statues. Indeed, the calligraphy of fallen politicians is sometimes seen as malign, casting a harmful shadow on society.

And after Hua Guofeng (1921-) succeeded Mao in 1976, he sought to replicate the Chairman’s cult, including a burst of calligraphic inscriptions. When Hua was felled from power by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), his humiliation included an aesthetic criticism of his clumsy handwriting. At the same time, Hua was derided for vanity when the Beijing Red Star Chicken Hatchery created a shrine around a calligraphic inscription he left during a visit.

The Leninist excesses of the Mao cult dampened the most flamboyantly self-promoting use of calligraphy, yet politicians continue to employ this deeply rooted cultural tool in relatively quiet ways. The effort to enshrine Premier Wen’s chalked calligraphy may raise questions about his political ambitions, or those of his supporters.

When Mao Zedong presented Pakistani mangoes as a sign of his favor to the worker-peasant propaganda teams in 1968, his fervent supporters desperately sought new technology to preserve the fruit. The mangoes ended up briefly worshipped, but uneaten. Saving Premier Wen’s chalk is a challenge more easily met, although it may raise eyebrows among cognescenti of China’s political culture.

Richard Kraus is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon. His most recent book is The Party and the Arty in China: The New Politics of Culture (2003).

Above image: The Chairman wields the brush: “Bombard the headquarters. My first big-character poster. Mao Zedong”