

The Struggle Between Text and Reader Control in Chinese Calligraphy Machines

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Abstract

This paper introduces a work-in-progress typology to classify and study the characteristics of Chinese text-based playable media (e.g. interactive installations, screen-based works, mobile applications, and computer games). Two factors are initially proposed for building such model: 1) How the visual properties of the characters are being used in the meaning making process of the works? 2) The degree and/or type of freedom provided to the users for interacting with the Chinese characters in the works.

The first factor is borrowed from Cosima Bruno who introduced a model for studying static Chinese visual poetry. For her, the ideographic nature of Chinese characters expanded the potentials of visual poetry. The author can and often will create a context for extracting embedded historical meanings (etymo-visual text) or inventing new meanings (beyond-lexical text) from the components of a character. [1]

Bruno's model is useful for analyzing the intersecting relation between the visual arrangement and the semantic values of Chinese words, but it only deals with static and non-digital works. As for the condition of interactive media, I would propose that the factor of how a user can interact with the individual character itself is vital for such analysis. The Chinese language differentiates itself from letter-based languages as it consists of thousands of characters instead of a small number of letters. This affected how the Chinese language coped with the Western-led development in IT technology (i.e. from typewriter to smart phone), but it also contributed to some unique inventions and possibilities such as the predated technology of predictive text in the 1950s. [2]

Nowadays, there are also many Chinese text-based works which make use of the uniqueness of Chinese languages and create their interactive aesthetics on how a user can play with the individual characters. I summarize three

possible conditions for these works: 1) Users are technically totally free to "write" anything, similar to using a pen in real-life; 2) Users can control the components of characters; 3) Users can only control the completed characters.

After deploying the three factors above for studying various Chinese text-based works, a specific kind of Chinese text-based work clearly stood out for which I coined the term Chinese Calligraphy Machines. In this kind of work, users are usually invited to draw a single character of their choice and to expand the character's etymological meaning and/or create new meaning with the provided context. To achieve this, these works are always designed to provide a large degree of freedom for the users to draw/write.

Some scholarly works on digital calligraphy have been done to study Chinese Calligraphy Machines along with static and performative works. [3] However, most of these researches focus on the traditional aesthetic issues or the phenomenological factors during the artistic creation, and their studies are not specific to interactive works. In this paper, I will try to apply a concept from Aarseth who suggested three constantly struggling ideological positions in cyborg aesthetics, namely author control, text control and reader control. [4] I would suggest that, when being played, the meaning making process of most of the Chinese Calligraphy Machines are struggling between text control and reader control, which also contributes to the interactive aesthetics of these works.

References

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Biography

Yue-Jin Ho is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Arts at the Open University of Hong Kong and currently a PhD candidate in the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong. He is also an artist, translator and writer. His works often deal with the relations between materiality, writing and history. His works have been selected by international festivals such as the IFVA Hong Kong, Cinetribes Osaka, ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival Berlin and Shanghai Biennale. Currently, his research focuses on Chinese text-based new media arts and visual poetry.