

Calligraphy art without boundaries

Reviving historical East Asian texts in the library

Run Run Shaw Library of City University of Hong Kong (CityU) is the first university library in Hong Kong to acquire the Collection of Korean Anthologies (CKA) (Hanja: 《韓國歷代文集叢書》; Hangul: 한국역대문집총서), a massive collection of more than 3,000 classic anthologies written by more than 3,000 Korean writers from 7th century to early 20th century in Chinese characters. In 2012, CityU, in collaboration with Jeju National University (Korea) and University of California, Berkeley (USA), launched a major digital index database that transcribed the essay-level titles of CKA into Chinese, Hangul, and Hangul Romanization. CityU Library has also shelved China's largest historical encyclopedic Chinese texts collection Siku Quanshu (SKQS) (Chinese: 《四庫全書》) together with a database.

Despite the huge effort in digitization, the reading rates of CKA and SKQS databases are low mainly because the knowledge system of ancient East Asia is different from the West. As such, the terminologies used in historical East Asian texts are largely different than the terminologies used today. Without sufficient guidance on contextual analysis, it is difficult for students to understand the historical East Asian texts, let alone conduct research on them. Historical manuscripts and rare books in other languages also present a similar problem to students and even researchers.¹

Before the invention of typing devices, these historical East Asian texts were all hand-written with Calligraphy. Even though Koreans generally use phonetic Hangul nowadays, calligraphy practitioners still use Chinese characters in their artworks. In Hong Kong and Mainland China, it is mandatory for primary and junior secondary students to practice calligraphy arts with a traditional brush. Although most of them do not continue to practice it, they generally appreciate the unique beauty of calligraphy. Therefore, Chinese calligraphy is a common communicative art among East Asia nations.

It is not enough for an established academic library to offer the best possible collections and services, it must go a step further to ensure they are indeed used.² In response to the low reading rates of these historical East Asian texts, the Calligraphy Connections Project (CCP) designed a two-stage patron-engagement model that aims to provide students with an innovative extra-curricular pathway to improve their life-long information literacy abilities through creative works and active engagement with undervalued historical East Asian texts by leveraging their interest in calligraphy. CCP also emphasizes embracing and sharing

Steve Ching is special advisor at the City University of Hong Kong Run Run Shaw Library, email: hsching@cityu.edu.hk. Wai Lok Richard Wong is student, Faculty of Law, at the University of Hong Kong, email: wai.wong107@gmail.com.

the cultural diversity of the Sinosphere beyond disciplines, institutions, borders, languages, senses, and technology.

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education has been the CCP's guiding framework; the ways students practice information literacy skills through their creative process are reflected in a previous article.³ The following section will outline the activities design of the two-stage patron-engagement model.

Two-stage patron-engagement model

Stage 1: Learning engagement through creative works

In the first stage of CCP's engagement model, the target group is students majoring in different disciplines. These students are cultivated to access and critically engage with the historical East Asian texts that are rarely encountered in their curriculum.

1. Tutorials. In collaboration with the CityU students' calligraphy club, students with limited knowledge in calligraphy and historical East Asian texts are engaged to participate in weekly small groups calligraphy and historical East Asian texts tutorials, supported by librarians and their peers who are good at calligraphy. Empowered by a text-mining application, students can directly search, explore, and critically assess the development of the variant Chinese characters and ancient scholarly works via library databases.

2. Calligraphy competitions. CCP hosts calligraphy competitions, which invite students from Korea, Hong Kong, and Mainland China to re-create poems or passages from historical East Asian texts in calligraphy and write reflective essays ("My Story of Creation"), which expand upon their thinking. The students' contributions will be selected by scholars and librarians and compiled in monographs to provide additional powerful incentives for students to participate.

3. Translation competitions. Mindful of the inherent language barrier of appreciating the historical East Asian texts, the CCP and CityU's Department of Linguistic and Translation (LT Department) established the JC Poetic Heritage Translation Awards and encourages students from CityU and secondary schools to explore and transmit the historical East Asian poetic heritage (in Chinese) to the world through their translation into English.⁴

Stage 2: Cross-border community engagement

In CCP's second stage of engagement, the target groups are students and the community. Students' creative works with the historical East Asian texts are disseminated through student-led cross-border community engagement activities.

1. Workshops and seminars. CCP collaborates with overseas partner universities to conduct an online seminar where students can freely exchange their stories of creation for the joint exhibition. Students reflect that these cross-border cultural exchanges based on calligraphy and historical East Asian texts are rarely encountered in their undergraduate curriculum and are mutually beneficial to students of both countries.

2. Roving exhibitions. Collecting students' contributions in different formats from the stage 1 activities, academicians' calligraphy artworks, and selected texts from SKQS and CKA, CCP has co-organized with students to curate campus roving exhibitions held at universities within the Sinosphere and the United Kingdom that are open to public. Furthermore, students (those who were interested in cross-cultural studies) are encouraged to make short videos to express their research findings and perhaps even their emotions

related to the historical East Asian texts where the librarians' role is to couch their digital storytelling skills. Both sighted and visually impaired students partnered to become the docent of the guided tours for the exhibitions to facilitate a deeper cultural exchange and bond between themselves and the community.



Students' video titled "Korean classics alive in Hong Kong—Choe Chi-won," accessed at https://www.cityu.edu.hk/cityvod/video/play/LIB/Korean_documentary.aspx.

Furthermore, students are engaged to do the recitals in Chinese dialects and Korean (Hanja and Hangeul), together with calligraphy artwork boards produced by laser-cutting and the corresponding audio description. Exhibits in different media with the aid of digital tools serve an important purpose to embrace diversity in spoken languages and inclusion in facilitating the need of visually impaired students to access and appreciate the historical East Asian poetic heritage through auditory and tactile senses. Similar outputs are expected in future exhibitions.



Calligraphy artwork board (laser-cut) with content: "Gilded Pleasure Boat in Waves of Midst" (English translation and audio description).

The second stage of the engagement model relies heavily on collaboration with external organizations. It is our hope that allowing students hands-on opportunities to engage with external organizations in real-world publication activities through CCP would increase students' sense of ownership and allow them to benefit from connections with scholars from other universities. The following section highlights how students benefitted from collaboration with external organizations.

Cross-pollination of ideas and perspectives between Korea and Hong Kong

CityU students were supported to curate an exhibition at the Korean Cultural Centre in Hong Kong (KCC) featuring their calligraphy artworks (themed on any topic they choose but must be based on ancient East Asian texts), award-winning works of the translation competition, and historical East Asian texts.

An exhibition can be a tool of storytelling. With the guidance of the KCC professional curatorial team, student curators were able to learn how to curate an exhibition that would draw community members to the students' creative outputs they were exposed to and the perspectives that each creative work present.

Calligraphy exhibitions nowadays focus primarily on the visual aesthetics of calligraphy. To professional calligraphers, each character is considered less as a sign used in Chinese writing than as a miniature abstract painting brought into being by a brush. While students writing calligraphy in CPP exhibitions certainly emulated the artistic writing styles of past calligraphers, the design of calligraphy artworks should also respond to the sentiments conveyed in the works of ancient literati. Also, some of the literature works of ancient scholars have been disseminated in different versions for hundreds of years. So students were encouraged not only to blindly reproduce literature works, but also take a step further to refer to the original historical texts via databases while creating the calligraphy artworks and providing captions containing the book images that they selected in the exhibitions.


In effect, each calligraphy artwork underlies an ancient East Asian text, for example:

Boxun Yan
閻博迅

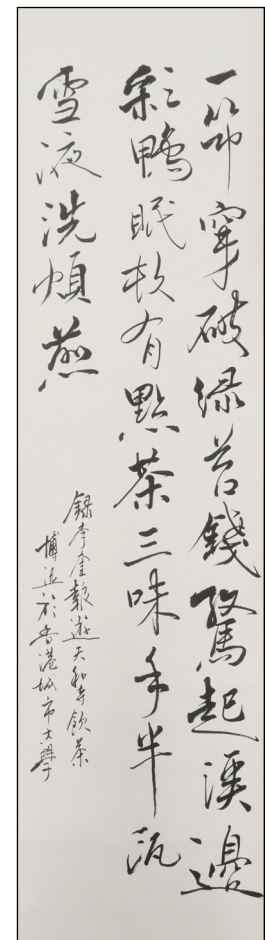
題目: 遊天和寺飲茶·用東坡詩韻·

一筇穿破綠苔錢。驚起溪邊彩鴨眠。
賴有點茶三昧手。半甌雪液洗煩煎。

文獻來源:《東國李相國全集》卷三



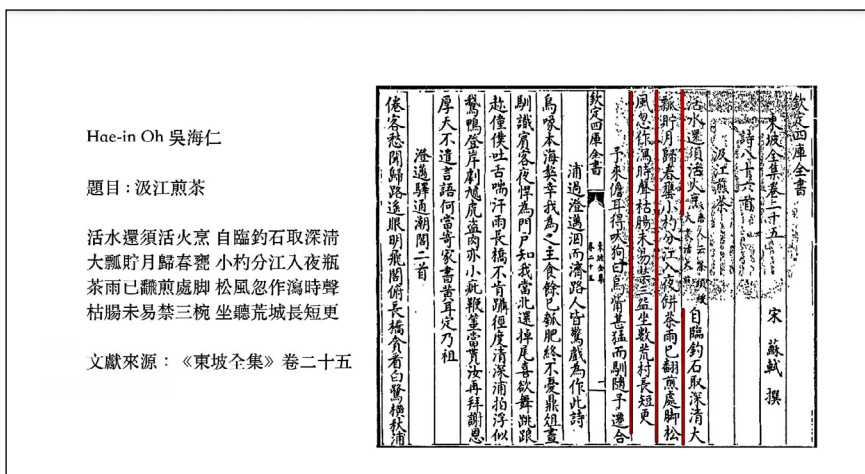
Top: The caption of the calligraphy artwork created by CityU student Boxun Yan, majoring in electrical engineering, with the original book image of CKA. Right: Calligraphy artwork created by CityU student Boxun Yan replicating a poem authored by ancient Korean literati Yi Gyobo (1168–1241), highlighted red in the caption.



The more the CPP collects students' calligraphy artworks, the more historical East Asian texts that were rediscovered, reinterpreted, and re-presented to other patrons who generally find these texts irrelevant to them (especially students majoring in Science and Engineering).

After the exhibition at KCC, Jigu Institute and Seoul National University (SNU) jointly curated a calligraphy exhibition at SNU Cultural Centre. Jigu Institute is an organization established mainly by renowned scholars and academicians in Hong Kong and China to promote the preservation of intangible cultural heritage such as calligraphy, and most of them specialize in various scientific fields. Recommended by the Jigu Institute, students and Jigu Institute scholars' calligraphy artworks and translation works themed on CKA were sent to SNU for the Gwan-ak Literati Calligraphy Exhibition.

The professors and students from SNU created calligraphy artworks themed on ancient Chinese scholar Su Shi's (1037–1101) poems. SNU compiled a catalogue of all the artworks and gave CCP participants a copy of the catalogue. To our surprise, some of the poems that they replicated are unfamiliar even to Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese students. CityU students were encouraged to compare the version of the poems replicated in the artworks with that of the poems recorded in SKQS. During this exercise, CityU students made some serendipitous findings that they have never thought of before.



Top: The caption of the calligraphy artwork created by SNU student Hae-in Oh with the original book image of SKQS. Right: Calligraphy Artwork created by SNU student Hae-in Oh, highlighted red in the caption.



Curating a calligraphy exhibition with SNU was also an opportunity for Chinese professors and students to recollect the lost memories of ancient Chinese characters. In their poster of the joint calligraphy exhibition, the Chinese Character “𠄎” was written. It is difficult even for Chinese to identify this Chinese character. Research with dictionaries unveiled that this is the ancient variant form of the Chinese Character “展,” which means “exhibition.” Due to standardization of Chinese characters, we have lost the opportunities to learn their variant text forms. This is a wake-up call for us to be more open-minded of the forms and evolution of Chinese characters.



Poster of the Gwan-ak Literati Calligraphy Exhibition and Science and Arts: Calligraphy Arts without Boundaries at the SNU Cultural Centre.

Looking ahead

The visibility of CKA and SKQS databases are low, but these collections are the irreplaceable testimonials of our cultural past and shaped our East Asian identity. The barrier of students accessing these historical texts is the perceived lack of relevancy to them. Bearing in mind the already heavy workload and stress of students in their curriculum, CCP was deliberately designed as an extra-curricular engagement activity through a combination of arts and historical texts without any grading assignments.

Without any commitment, we are glad to see that students—more than half of which come from science and engineering disciplines—have been actively contributing throughout the two stages of CCP learning engagement activities. Students’ creative works were not limited to calligraphy art, gradually extending to other art forms such as translation, recitals, and videos. The two-stage engagement model was designed to mimic a complete research cycle to provide students opportunities to practice information literacy skills throughout the cycle and more importantly to function as real scholars through publications. Publishing students’ creative works has the effect of critically engaging both students

and community members with historical texts that a simple database demonstration or a book display does not have.

CCP's two-stage engagement model has proven to be an effective way to coach students' information literacy skills through a combination of arts and historical East Asian texts.⁵ This model is replicable in historical texts of other languages because of the unique duality of calligraphy arts as both a practical means of communication and artistic expression. Collaboration with external institutions has played a significant role in the implementation of CCP. Our hope is that this project will continue to create an environment amenable to a cross-pollination of ideas and perspectives between patrons from different disciplines and backgrounds through ongoing engagement with arts and historical East Asian texts. ♪

Notes

1. Danielle Mihram and Melissa L. Miller, "USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts: A Second Polymathic Multimodal Digital Project," *College & Research Libraries News* 82, no. 9 (October 2021): 420.
2. Loanne Snavely, "Engaging Undergraduates with the Academic Library," in *Student Engagement and the Academic Library* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2012), 1–10.
3. Steve H. Ching, Richard W. L. Wong, and Brad C. New, "The Calligraphy Connections Project: Engaged Scholarship of Historical East Asian Texts," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 5 (2020): 102194.
4. "JC Poetic Heritage Translation Awards," City University of Hong Kong Department of Linguistics and Translation, accessed November 2, 2022, <https://lt.cityu.edu.hk/StudentLife/scholarships/JCPHTA/2022/>.
5. Sallyann Price, "2022 International Innovators," *American Libraries* (July/August 2022): 22-23, <https://digital.americanlibrariesmagazine.org/html5/reader/production/default.aspx?pubname=&edid=9d32d285-77ae-48b0-8e0c-77ed019ab777>.