



a disappearing act



Above: François Chastanet's book, *Ground Calligraphy in China*.

All the images in this article were provided by Chastanet. Those that come from his book are marked with this symbol: 

Opposite: A man writes a large character with water on the pavement of a Chinese park. 

By Robin Sutton Anders · In his recently published book, *Ground Calligraphy in China*, French architect and graphic designer François Chastanet unlocks the cultural phenomenon of *dishu*—the Chinese art of lettering in public spaces. Rather than writing with traditional pen and ink, *dishu* artists rely on tall, handmade brushes as their instrument and water as their medium. And instead of a graceful movement of the wrist and fingertips, a *dishu* artist's whole body performs a dance as it sweeps through the lettering strokes, the brush held at attention, parallel to the body, feet sidestepping in ballroom fashion. Here, Chastanet shares his experience with the art of ground writing and reveals the impact of its ephemeral quality on artists and their passersby.

How did you first learn about *dishu*?

I actually learned about *dishu* through low-quality tourists' videos on YouTube, shootings dating from the early 2000s. Previously, I was only aware of specific large-scale calligraphic displays in China, like *dazibao* [large character poster] walls or propaganda posters.

Why did this art form pique your interest?

After writing two publications addressing the

unexpected evolution of Latin letters in urban graffiti contexts, I wanted to work on a similar massive urban writing phenomenon. The study of Asia and China then imposed itself quite naturally. Unlike the *Pixação* phenomenon in São Paulo and Cholo writing in Los Angeles that are vandal practices, *dishu* is a largely recognized, appreciated, and socially respected public graffiti practice.

In an urban context, the ability to write both vertically and horizontally in Chinese visual language based on symbols that represent an idea and/or word was powerful. This different relation to space and the ephemeral nature of *dishu* inscriptions seemed to constitute a very rich photographic playground. The homemade writing tools' design process also seemed very interesting; it became a photographic work on its own.

What are Chinese lettering artists attempting to communicate through *dishu*?

Usually, these artists aren't trying to communicate a particular message. *Dishu* is more of an introspective monologue, wherein the process of writing is more important than the sign produced. Most of the time, practitioners are not inclined to clearly explain their intentions.





This spread: Dishu artists often write extended texts, covering large areas of pavement. 田

What can you learn about these artists' identities by watching them work?

The different body postures and attitudes of a person writing in a public space show us the writing level achieved. The straighter the body and the farther the hand is removed from the tip of the brush, the more difficult the gesture that produces the calligraphy. This kind of posture is usually the mark of a higher and more relaxed level of skill, the ultimate step of self-mastery.

Practitioners often forget their own bodies and experience the act of writing like a musician, abandoning themselves in the gesture. They are both deeply focused and totally relaxed.

Do you mean that this artistry actually has the ability to impact the artists' physical health?

Dishu is often presented as the ideal meeting of culture and health. Writing on the ground affects the whole body, so proper strength is necessary. Some practitioners are over 90 years old and proudly declare that, at this age, their body parts still listen to their brain only because they practice dishu.

In China, this activity is perceived as a soft sport that allows you to train your memory and intellectual faculties by memorizing long texts.

You've said that letterings "make the whole body break into a spontaneous dance and infinite formal renewals." What does that mean?

We apply the word "calligraphy" by default on the Chinese culture, but it's probably better to describe it as the Chinese "art of writing," as the sinologist Jean François Billeter proposes. While Latin calligraphy follows pretty rigid canons, the aim of the Chinese art of writing—where one can invent one's own voice inside the different styles offered (static regular, semi-cursive, cursive, grass-writing or crazy cursive, etc.)—is rather different.

As a result, Chinese practitioners totally give themselves over to the art of writing (like musicians moving their heads or arms), and some of them are literally dancing as they write. In this state, calligraphers try to produce renewals in letterforms, finding an original way of reinterpreting a specific calligraphic style or of producing their own.

Why would people choose to express themselves through writing with water over other permanent forms of expression?

To understand why this is such a fulfilling art form, imagine the early morning in an urban park in China. Various cultural activities, such as tai chi, singing, and dancing coexist with





This spread: Dishu artists photographed from above. 田

dishu. Here, the need to be a part of a group, where you can share with others and express yourself, is essential. Practitioners of ground calligraphy like being together, meeting, making friends, not staying at home, sharing moments in a nice environment surrounded by nature. In this context, the artists talk about literature or comment on a calligraphic gesture. The elderly people's role is important because they teach this art to their grandchildren, whom they are often raising since parents have a heavy workload or may work far away from home.

So the main draw is the opportunity for personal fulfillment in a social context. And because dishu is a public practice, it has to be ephemeral by definition so as not to impose itself on the others.

Do you believe this art's ephemeral nature adds to its allure?

Dishu is an ode to impermanence: These signs are made with a desire for anonymity and obliteration. Inscriptions are never signed by calligraphers as authors, which shows a higher form of anonymity, deeply rooted in Chinese culture and going beyond the simple need of protection against a censoring power limiting the freedom of speech. As Billeter notes in his

courses about cultural permanence in Chinese society, "the choice of anonymity is a will of independence; to really stay independent, one needs to be anonymous because as soon as one has a name, we enter the game of prestige and power and you lose your freedom."

But these street practices, even if executed very seriously on a daily basis, are considered mainly as training and entertainment, a transitory calligraphic activity.

Water calligraphy originated in a North Beijing Park in the 1990s. How has it gained traction?

Dishu first emerged from a small circle of calligraphy enthusiasts in Beijing, but since then, it's become a major popular phenomenon, accepted and now officially recognized by Chinese authorities in some cities.

I've said that the content of the actual inscription seems secondary to many calligraphers—that dishu is more of a way to experiment with characters and shapes than to communicate a message. But from an external view, these ephemeral water inscriptions could constitute an opportunity to express political demands or criticisms. It is important to note, however, that the presence of uniformed guards in the parks, although discreet, is a reality. A tacit status quo seems to be shared by all practitioners and the authorities: You can write whatever you want, whenever you like, as long as the content of the inscription is as neutral as possible, and based on classical texts and official poetry or state mottoes.

So because this art form is nonthreatening and even embraced by Beijing as a part of the country's cultural renaissance, the government has embraced it and encouraged its proliferation. For example, dishu was used for the opening of the International Horticulture Exposition in Xi'an two summers ago. A large demonstration took place near a river with many street calligraphers coming from different parts of China.

Why do you think people stop to watch these calligraphers?

Calligraphy is an ancient part of the Chinese artistic culture that is still very much alive today. The Chinese people show a lot of respect when they see someone developing an original calligraphic style. It's impressive to see how many ordinary citizens stop for several minutes to observe and exchange enthusiastically with street calligraphers, give their impressions on a piece of lettering, or ask questions about tools. Sometimes they even applaud spontaneously.





Some street calligraphers produce a huge quantity of texts covering large surfaces. It's always pretty fascinating to discover.

What are the main calligraphic styles used in public spaces?

Only a few people are able to master different calligraphic styles. Most of the time the practitioners choose a style that corresponds to their inner personality and try to achieve self-actualization through the mastering of this precise style. Cursive calligraphic styles are highly appreciated among Chinese practitioners, but the static regular seems to be the first step to master before experimenting with anything else.

It seems that the act of constructing these brushes is just as much of an art form as the writing itself. Would you agree?

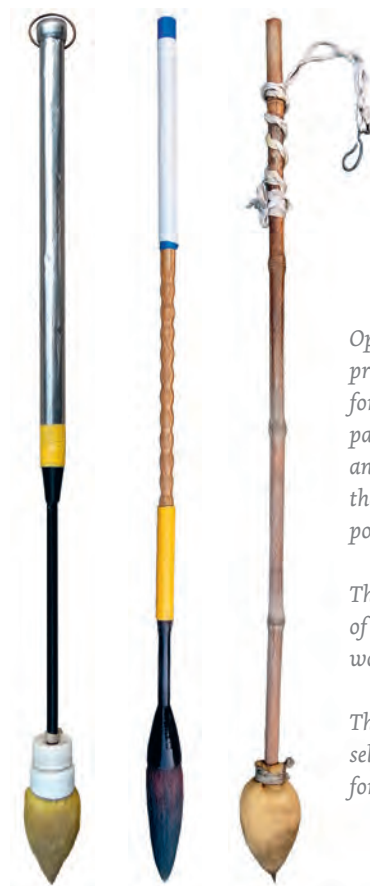
In the early days of dishu, at the beginning of the '90s, the writing tools were very basic, like a piece of sponge or even a rolled towel. The first street brushes were made out of linen or wool rags and also from wooden palm fibers. These kinds of tools can still be seen today, especially in Shanghai, where street brushes made of tissue or palm fibers still seem to be popular.

The construction varies from city to city, but nowadays brushes are made mainly of foam. You will sometimes see the use of a simple plastic bottle, which has the double purpose of handle and water container, on top of which is placed a similar foam nib. Some calligraphers specialize in outlining letterforms, using the plastic bottle with a tiny hole in the cap as a precise spray can, controlling the pressure on the bottle manually in order to obtain a shaky thin line.

These days, you can find industrially made street brushes in specialized art shops in Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai. The most common model is called the "baiyun" brush and was named after Bai Yunzhi, who has practiced dishu since 1999 in South Beijing. He was the first to propose a piece of foam imitating the Chinese hair brushes and a longer metal shaft, usually a light tube. This type of brush was handcrafted and hundreds of thousands of copies were made by later generations of street calligraphers.

Really, any everyday object can be turned into a writing tool: the stick of the brush can be made from a bamboo stick, a broomstick, a broken umbrella, PVC tubes used for plumbing, an aluminum camera tripod, an antenna. The nib can be made from old foam mattresses or sofas, socks, linen—the variation is endless. Manufactured brushes have a better-looking overall shape, but the tips of the handcrafted





Opposite page: Dishu provides opportunities for socializing in the park, as practitioners and those who watch them discuss the finer points of calligraphy. 𠆩

This page, left: Portraits of two dishu artists at work. 𠆩

This page, right: A selection of brushes made for dishu. 𠆩





In a cross-cultural encounter, Chastanet shows Chinese dishu artists how to write Roman letterforms with the dishu brush. Chastanet's Roman letters create an interesting contrast to the Chinese inscriptions on the pavement.



ones made by the calligraphers themselves are usually better.

**Does the height of the brush make a difference?
How do you hold it?**

Imagine yourself drawing with your hand about 2 feet from the nib and consider how difficult it is to control a stroke in that situation. It results in an extremely unsteady brush. When the stick is made of thin bamboo, this shakiness is even more powerful; you need a superior ability to control it. More rigid sticks like wood or metal (aluminum) are easier to control for beginners.

Depending on the type of brush you use, the placement of your hands changes because of the force required to move the brush on a rough surface with frictional resistance. The calligraphic rules and basic movements are fundamentally the same, since the contrast of the strokes is driven by pressure and the rotation of the brush. From the viewpoint of the calligrapher and the ductus' construction, there is no difference between dishu or practice on paper.

What types of brushes are best suited for certain types of lettering?

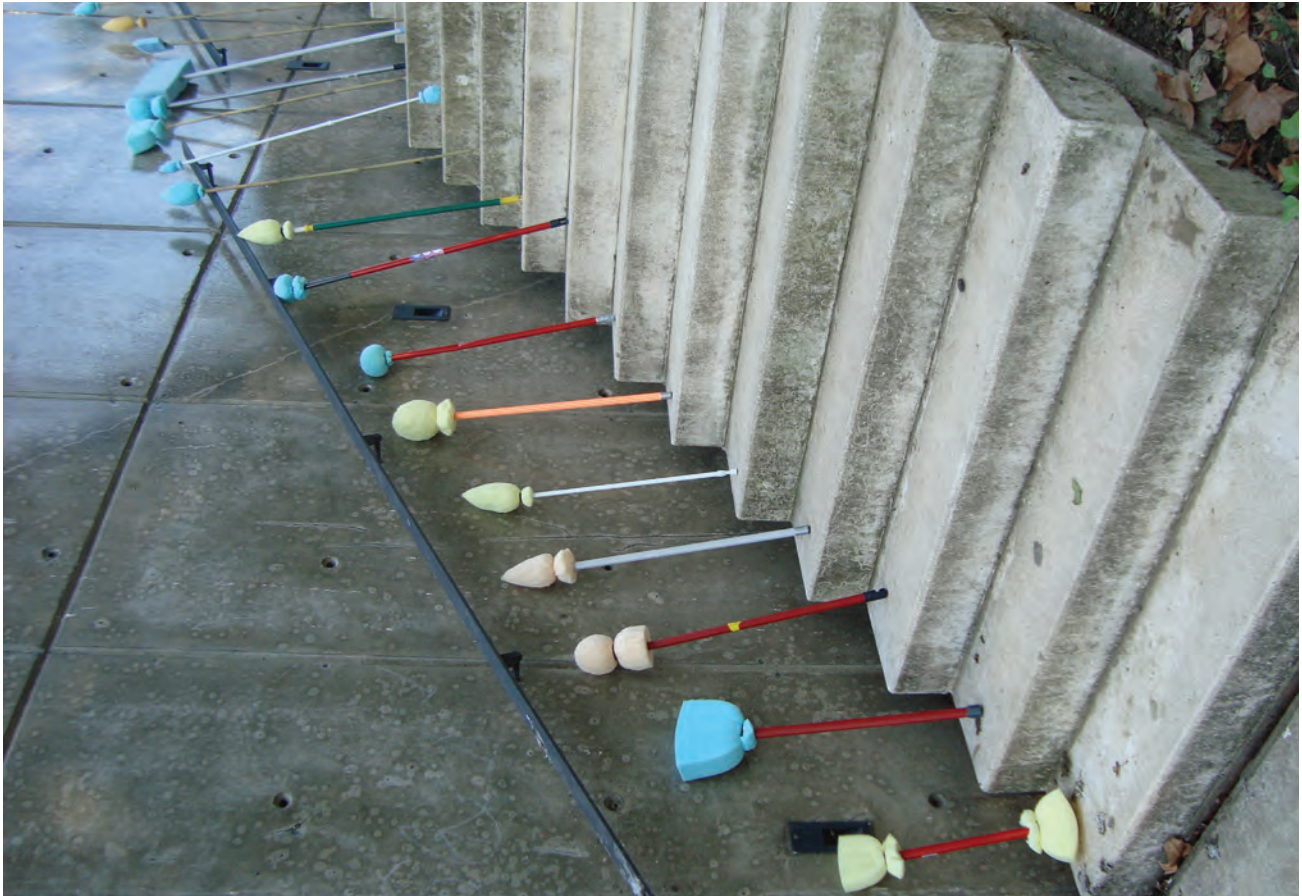
Like classic Chinese hair brushes, the foam street brushes used for dishu produce a contrast that can be partially related to what is often called "expansion" in Latin calligraphy. In other words, achieving thick and thin strokes based on the amount of pressure applied on a pointed nib. The Chinese art of writing also uses a lot of rotation movements. The best nibs are the ones that permit both very thin and very fat strokes. So with the same brush, you can master very different calligraphic styles, but of course that depends entirely on the calligrapher's capacities. Flow of water is also important: the more cursive your style is, the more you need a fast water flow.

You recently taught a dishu workshop in Utrecht, where you asked Western calligraphic artists to use Western forms. How does the art of water lettering change when transported to a different culture?

In the West, most calligraphers or lettering amateurs are used to working at a table on a small scale. Dishu asks you to change this scale. Gestures are much wider and the relation with your own body is modified. It demands a period of adaptation. The hardest part is to find signs or calligraphic styles that can be made with the dishu street brush, which creates a stroke's contrast based on the pressure transmitted to the nib.



*Behind the scenes:
Chastanet uses a video
camera attached to a pole
to record dishu artists in
action.*



Which Latin lettering models are best suited for street calligraphy?

The Chinese dishu brush can simulate expansion contrast, so I logically chose to adapt pointed pen calligraphic models. The lettering resembles everyday screen typefaces like Bodoni or Didot. These letter shapes are not optimized for large scale per se; they just correspond to the possibilities offered by the Chinese dishu brush.

These lettering models evolve as artists optimize them for water calligraphy. Maybe an artist adopts a more cursive way of drawing serifs, more vertical and condensed proportions that fit the urban context better, etc. The ductus is almost the same as a regular Latin calligraphy practice on paper with a metallic pointed nib. Maybe the main difference is the optimal hand placement in order to control the nib: it is extremely difficult to draw some Latin calligraphy with the hand at the extremity of the stick; usually the hand is placed closer to the nib. Between a third to a half of the stick closer is easier when starting the Latin dishu practice.

When you make a mistake with calligraphy, you throw the piece of paper away. How do dishu artists view mistakes in water calligraphy?

Mistakes are part of the learning process no matter the field of practice. In dishu, there is less pressure around making mistakes because doing an inscription with just water, which evaporates in a few seconds, evacuates the fear of the white page or any fear of spoiling materials. Water is free and available in quantity. And in dishu, the nature of the writing is ephemeral by definition, the function liberated from the idea of the paper as memory and “officiality.”

Writing on paper using only water is an old practice in China. When kids are learning to properly trace *hanzi* signs, they use a hair brush to draw strokes with just water. Then the paper is placed over a black or dark support to elucidate the signs. After the wet papers dry, students can trace signs again on the same surface. This technique saves a lot of paper while one is training.

Is dishu a good way for beginners to learn calligraphic arts?

Dishu is perfect for shy beginners because there is no pressure of failing, and it builds confidence. And the fun of dishu helps you to forget your fear. In my workshops, students become more and more self-assured as they practice outside, both alone and in groups.

Plus, dishu is a very effective pedagogic tool because you can get people to study and work



This spread: Chastanet has taught dishu workshops in Europe. Here, Westerners construct their own dishu brushes.



This spread: At venues in various European cities, Chastanet teaches Western students to practice dishu using Roman letterforms.

through painstaking (and for some, boring) historical calligraphic details without them being conscious of it. It is so marvelous to work in a sexy way on writing fundamentals.

This art form is very useful for left-handed people who have always had huge problems in classic calligraphy where the rhythm has to be from left to right and absolutely not the contrary (unless you write in a mirrored way). The foam brush helps left-handed artists avoid the friction that they usually have to fight against.

Is dishu popular in any Western cities?

It is highly probable that people inside the Chinese diaspora abroad are practicing dishu in big cities like New York or Paris, but I have no evidence of this yet and have seen no photographs to prove that. If your readers have some shots, I would be delighted to see them.

In the video of your workshop, you tell your students, “You come from a ballpoint civilization, and you have to forget it. You have to act as if these letters were something different.” Different in what way?

My generation, and those following, learned at school that the word-image is a kind of a

continuous loop traced in almost one single line, whether you're writing with ballpoints or round felt-tip markers. That is especially true in France, where most people write pretty cursive, compared with the United States, where everyday manuscript letters are more static and separated by space.

So discovering the real ductus by studying the historical structure of Latin letters represents a big gap for most people nowadays. Tracing letters properly to reactivate these historical shapes represents a big effort. The workshops I teach are attended by total beginners, confirmed calligraphers, and lettering amateurs. The “ballpoint civilization” expression is a useful idea to help people understand how writing tools of the past require a different attitude in drawing. For the past 50 years since the Bic Cristal (Bic ballpoint) was officially accepted by the French Ministry of Education, it has probably been the most-used writing tool in the world. Before that, the metallic pointed nib (*plume Sergent-Major*) was the official writing tool for all French schools. So yes, we are in a current ballpoint-and-keyboard civilization where the vast majority of fonts we are using every day on screen and paper are based on historical calligraphic models that are totally misunderstood and disconnected from the actual, still-existing everyday practices of writing with ballpoints.

Do you believe that dishu is an important part of a Chinese cultural renaissance?

The period of mimicking the West seems to be finished, and it is clear that China today seeks to reinterpret its own visual and pictorial historical identity. The concept of cultural heritage in China is a recent thing, but the art of writing will no doubt be at the center of this ongoing process.

Beijing wants to achieve a cultural renaissance in order to unleash a national desire to maintain the “social harmony,” which is the official motto of the Chinese government during the present troubled period. In a way, then, dishu participates in the implementation of the current official watchwords “tradition” and “harmony.” But it is difficult to evaluate the real adherence of street calligraphers to these slogans. Maybe some are conservatives who wish to work for the celebration of classic imperial Chinese culture in the current nationalist impulse initiated by the government. But more likely, most practitioners simply prefer to avoid any problems with the authorities and practice their craft calmly, focusing mainly on signs’ aesthetics, writing inscriptions with neutral or empty messages. ♦

