



## Energy Meets Character

*Today I celebrate the opening of my exhibition website [Blue Water Dragon Art Exhibition \( www.bluewaterdragon.com/ \)](http://www.bluewaterdragon.com/) with this article on the importance of understanding Chinese calligraphy as a means to understand cross cultural communication. (Above: Energy meets Character: oil on canvas 70x100)*

*“Time Flows Away Like River in the Water (Confucius)” or  
“Time is a created thing (Lao Zi)” (\*)*

Living in today's world, looking back, many of us believe that the progress of cultural processes are a natural thing. We talk about barbarian times, about early days when industrialization did not exist, we talk about past times as if they are below us on the ladder of evolutionism, and we use that ladder to categorize the world. We think and talk in terms of a first world, a second world, a new world, a third world, of the worlds where time stood still, of the world which progresses “well and quickly” into the 21st century, and we presume that this progress is an ongoing process. Some old hands

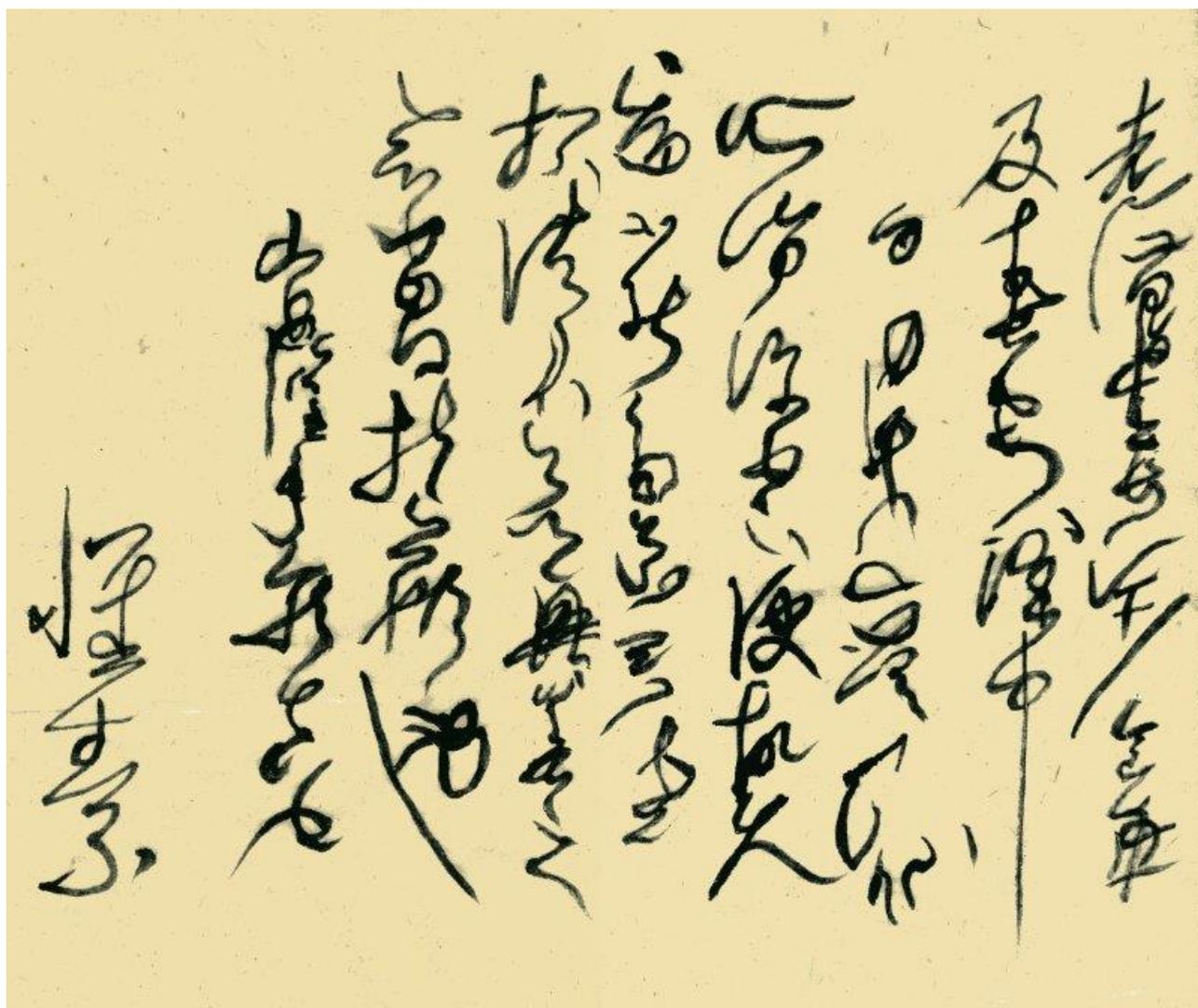
believe the early days were better, but no one wants to return to the days when you had to go outside in the storm to get your stuff done and freeze your butt off doing it. We generally enjoy modern comfort.

Yet, culture is not that simple. The quotes from both sages above show a contradiction and so is the realm of culture, a contradiction. On the one hand there is little we can do to influence culture, on the other hand we create it ourselves, like it or not. Time, for all intended purposes, is created through language, no more, no less. And as a great Western philosopher and linguist Edward Sapir once remarked that language both helps and retards us in our observation and exploration of the world. It implies that time and language in culture have boundaries which might unpleasantly hinder us to communicate. We miss the words of friendship, as the language of our culture does not allow us to express ourselves properly across cultural boundaries.

Within one culture equal limitations exist. Very few people believe that they always are able to express exactly what they feel. Luckily we have brilliant artists who help us in the transformation of language. And two of those I will mention here, somewhat shortly of course, as they broke through barriers of language.

The first artist is Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). He could be called the father of abstract painting in Western Europe. His barriers of language were very real as he was born with a peculiar affliction called Synesthesia. It causes people to see colors when they hear sounds and in Kandinsky's case it led to a journey of abstract coloring, which changed the culture of Western painting forever, modern art was born, and yet, as every gallant artist should, Wassily died in great poverty, as the world was not ready for his art.

The second artist is a Chinese calligrapher and Taoist priest called Zhang Xu: 张旭 less famous in the West, but regarded as one of the most influential calligraphers in China. He was known to be one of the Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup: and broke with all the formal rules on Chinese character writing during the Tang (700 ad) dynasty. He had a contemporary called Huai Su (懷素) who had an equal graving for wild running script and who seemed to do his best work when he was in an elevated state of mind. Not many of their calligraphic works have survived, but those that have are reproduced by calligraphers. (below my exercise reproduction of a calligraphy by Huai Su).



Zhang Xu's characters are wild, they seem abstract and unreadable, only experts know the translation of their characters, but they have one thing in common with the work of Kandinsky. They can be "felt", "heard" and they express "movement". In the work of Zhang Xu this was his very literal goal. He once observed the sword dances of the famous lady Gong Sun (who is immortalized in a statue in Xi'an) and let his brush move on the paper as her sword and body moved in dance. (below one of my paintings Tea with Huai Su: oil on canvas; 70x100). [blue water dragon digital art exhibition](#)

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The calligraphy of Zhang Xu changed my views on Chinese writing forever and when I teach workshops I refer to the art of calligraphy as "dancing on paper". In effect it is, feeling the dynamics of movement while executing the brush, seeing the dynamics in movement while observing Chinese calligraphy can make you understand the Chinese

language as an experience, and not as a mere abstract and difficult to comprehend picture, as is for most Westerners. In the same way looking at the colors, graphs and dynamics of the work of Kandinsky can open the mind to hearing the sounds which must have inspired him. It brings culture to life in a vigorous attempt to break through the boundaries of convention.



Between East and West, Zhang Xu and Kandinsky created a cross cultural space in which “the colors float like water and the character is created”. Within culture, time is not a ladder but an interchange between convention and renewal. Such is essential to cross cultural communication. If we want to experience the “other” culture, we need to break with all our linguistics conventions on advanced development and return to the

source of our understanding unprejudiced. Only then can we create new relations. It is expressed through the words of Edward Sapir when he wrote on musical perception.

“To our greeting a friend in disguise is added the much greater pleasure of finding him transported to a higher plan of being (Sapir, 1985: 439)”.

Such a meeting inspired me to paint the work and “Thea with Hai Su” (100 X 70: oil on canvas) as an homage to the possibility of new friendships.

I sincerely hope you will enjoy a visit to my online digital exhibition!

(\* It is always pleasant to read all the quotes from wise men, though we never know if they actually did say the words put into their mouth. Confucius for instance, never wrote anything, everything he said was written down by his pupils, and later, I suspect many people added wisecracks for which Confucius would probably turn around in his grave).

1985: Sapir, E. : The Mandelbaum Collection: Berkeley Los Angeles, University of California Press.