

Wendan Li, *Chinese Writing & Calligraphy*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2009, x + 263 pp.

**Marye Moran**

The act of writing, in most cultures, has merely practical benefits, allowing communication, direction, and the exchange of ideas. However, as Wendan Li emphasises in *Chinese Writing & Calligraphy*, for the Chinese, the practice of calligraphy involves the melding of “language, history, philosophy, and aesthetics” (p. 1). This multi-dimensional quality is mirrored by the structure of Li’s many-faceted book. If opened to a random page, the text could seem like a how-to guide, a history book, a philosophical exploration, a biography, a workbook, or a book of art.

Li explains the techniques of calligraphy, even providing practice sheets, and also writes about the significance of this practice in terms of art, language, culture, history, and philosophy. The author engages the reader by interweaving these elements together, providing, for example, an explanation of the different types of script (Ch. 8-11), interspersed with how each variation developed, its characteristics, and life stories of its masters.

The book is not limited to the craft of calligraphy. In order to show the extent to which this art is ingrained into every aspect of Chinese life, Li gives a historical overview of China, but through the lens of a calligrapher, showing how each event shaped the craft.

Her writing is based on teaching materials gathered when the author was a professor of Chinese Culture through Calligraphy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She has the voice of a teacher, ending each chapter with discussion questions. While these may seem elementary or condescending to the expert (she inquires, “what do you hope to learn by using this book” (p. 19), and “how is Chinese calligraphy different from, for example, English calligraphy” (p. 19)), these add to the interactive nature of the book and can spark new thoughts.

Li’s aim was to teach calligraphy and characters to those without a background in Chinese language and culture, reaching out especially to Westerners. She certainly meets that goal, giving the reader a different outlook than if they only read the history, or the philosophy, or just learned the practice. Each element of the book is, perhaps, not particularly original, but the combination is new and worthwhile. This text would certainly appeal to its intended audience; however, its appeal to others seems limited, as the beauty of this book is how the components work together, combining practice with background knowledge. For those already familiar with calligraphy, or only interested in the historical information or character structure, for example, a more specialized book may be better suited to their needs.

When explaining the origins of calligraphy, the author writes of the belief that a divine being, Cang Jie, created the written characters, and notes that the Chinese “have shared a tremendous awe for written symbols” (p. 5). It is clear that Li deeply shares this awe, and longs to spread it to the previously unexposed reader. In that, certainly, she succeeds.

**Marye Moran** is the youngest book reviewer to have contributed to the *Chinese Cross Currents*. She is an undergraduate at Boston College, Class of 2014, in the Arts and Sciences Honors Program, with a major in English in which she obviously excels. As one of the top 12 students in her class, she is taking part in the Presidential Scholars Program. She is studying the Chinese language as well as the Western Cultural Tradition and Psychology. Her writing experience includes contributing to *The Heights* newspaper and working on the staff for the literary magazine *Stylus*. In spite of her youth she already has an impressive record in volunteer work, including service trips to Appalachia and Lourdes, France. In addition, she participated in the Presidential Scholars Service Learning Program, where she was a volunteer intern at the St. Francis House homeless shelter and The Italian Home School for at-risk children. She developed her interest in writing and Chinese before coming to Boston College, as editor-in-chief of her high school yearbook, a staff member and contributor to the literary magazine *Perspectives*, and as a participant on a month-long cultural immersion program in Shanghai.