

CHAPTER 4: TAOIST CALLIGRAPHY



百寿图



Fig 1: Two examples of sets of one hundred graphic improvisations upon the longevity character. The Chinese concept of 'Five-fold Happiness' is made up of Luck, Prosperity, Longevity, Happiness and Wealth. These charts are talismans to ensure longevity.

The objective of this chapter is to establish the Taoist provenance of traditional Chinese calligraphy as an example of a graphic Chinese art form that is a vehicle for Taoist precepts that has had significant impacts upon the development and content of Western experimental, contemporary art practices because of its unique methodology of creating seemingly endless

variations upon a single motif (*Fig 1* and Appendix #2). Unbounded creativity such as this was unknown in the West before exposure to exotic cultural practices such as Chinese calligraphy. Let us be reminded that until the nineteenth century Western artists produced art, usually commissioned, of a specific genre, such as a religious art, in a realist style, working within specified subjects. Creative exploration by the great Western artists such as Michelangelo (1475 – 1564), Rembrandt (1606 – 1669), Falconet (1716 - 1791), and Rodin (1840 – 1917) was limited to the artist's individual interpretation of a traditional subject, the embellishment of an existing style, or at most, the development of a new genre derived from existing forms, for example landscape and still life genres were extracted from the painting of historic themes and religious narratives (*Fig 2, Fig 3*).

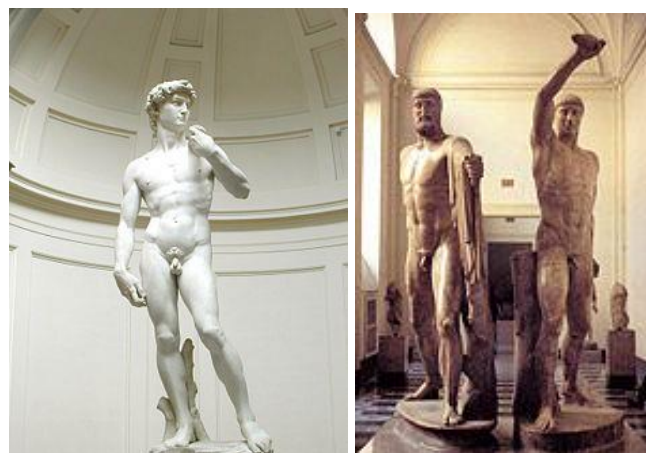


Fig 2: Michelangelo's *David*, (1504) is an interpretation of the style of Classical Greek sculpture, such as Harmodius and Aristogiton (477/476 BC, copy by Kritios).



Fig 3: Michelangelo's *Slave* (c.1513), marble, 276 cm high. Described as unfinished, Michelangelo's *Slaves* pushed the conventions of his discipline beyond mere interpretation, achieving an innovation that established a new style and direction for sculpture. With their figures metaphorically trapped in the stone, they were an inspiration to Rodin 400 years later when he used the stone itself as an expressive element in sculptures such as *The Hand of God* (1917). Rodin's work, although exploring a conventional subject, shows the improvisational approach of Modernism, where materiality became a sculptural subject.

Exposure to the spontaneous approach of Chinese and Japanese artists to painting and abstract calligraphy in the nineteenth century inspired many Western artists to produce

unbidden art expressive of their own ideas using tropes derived from the source of influence, such as Taoism (*Fig 4*). This mode became the norm so artists that followed were indirectly influenced by Taoism. Specifically, in this thesis graphic improvisation upon the calligraphic character that signifies *longevity* will be studied to establish how aspects of the Tao, or the Way, as the key Taoist philosophical maxim is embodied in calligraphy, and from there, in aspects of Modernism, Abstract Expressionism, aspects of the Minimalist canon and installation art.¹



Fig 4 : Henri Matisse, *La Serpentine* (1909), Bronze. The linear, abstracted figure is like a drawing in space, reminiscent of the spontaneous brush marks of calligraphy.

The following verse from the *Tao Te Ching* describes the process of becoming, the ‘creation myth’ of Taoism, that is symbolised in the abstract structure of a calligraphic character.²

*The Way (Tao) gave rise to the one,
The one gave rise to the two,
The two gave rise to the three,
The three gave rise to all the ten thousand things.*³

The ‘one’ is the totality of the metaphysical principle of chaotic order, the primordial unity, represented by the totality of the calligraphy - the mark intertwined with the space on the whole

¹ See Chapter Two for historical background. Examples of calligraphy cited in this chapter were documented in Hué, Vietnam in 2000 (see Page 108).

² Lazlo Legeza, *Tao Magic: the Secret Language of Diagrams and Calligraphy* (1975). Original edition, Thames and Hudson, London. P 22 – 23.

³ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Verse 42. From Stephen Little with Shawn Eichman, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, 2000, Art Institute of Chicago, University of California Press.

page – the egg-gourd. This is the “multiplicity of phenomenological existence”.⁴ The ‘two’ are the harmonised binaries known as *yin* and *yang*. They are a categorisation of all effects, or phenomena, as polar in essence. In calligraphy the polar categories are the mark and the space. These may be imagined to symbolise, comparatively, elements such as the body (mark) and breath or ether (space); the real (mark) and the imaginary (space); continuity of form (mark) and the intangible, the changeable (space), energy (mark) and stasis (the space). The three is the liminal zone that “centers all polar phenomena”.⁵ The great variety of entities that make up the tangible and intangible world, “the ten thousand things” are symbolised by many thousand fold sets of improvised variations upon the calligraphic character (*Fig 1*, Appendix #2).

In this archetype of multiplicity, calligraphy’s relationships to Deleuze’s theory of representation from his book, *Repetition and Difference*, which was summarised in the Introduction, comes into frame to be elaborated upon to further establish its correlation with Taoist precepts (page 12).⁶ This chapter focuses on the representation of change and continuity as it is represented in calligraphic improvisation using impermanence and context, spatiality and form as the binary metaphors. As Lao-Tzu puts it:

See all things flourish and dance
in endless variation⁷

Longevity characters are essentially a representation of language: an utterance symbolised in text. Language is the representation of ideas and recognitions. Rather than investigate the characters’ repeated, literal significance, which is ‘longevity’, and self-explanatory, the encoding of their transitional imagery will be interpreted as an outcome of creative improvisations. The improvisations, or transformations, may contain encoded imagery, and are further complicated by placement, that is, their context’s encoding (*Fig 6*, *Fig 7*).

The extraordinary, unbounded creativity of traditional Taoist calligraphers will be explored to demonstrate calligraphy’s embodied Taoist precepts. The proliferation of longevity characters found adorning examples of Vietnam’s Imperial, Buddhist and vernacular heritage in Hué have been chosen to analyse this Taoist phenomenon. An embroidery of one hundred longevity characters in Chua Van Phuoc,⁸ Hué, Vietnam, and the longevity characters adorning the arte

⁴ Girardot, N. J. 1983. *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos (hun tun)*. Berkeley: University of California. Pp 246, 247.

⁵ Ibid. P 246.

⁶ See page 4.

⁷ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Verse 16.

⁸ Van Phuoc Buddhist pagoda (*chua* means pagoda).

deco mausoleum of Emperor Khai Dinh⁹ in Hué are the examples referred to here. Karl E. Weick's categorisation of graded degrees of improvisation, the process of graphic improvisation will be applied to the common longevity character,¹⁰ categories that differentiate the creative process of visual art practices at one extreme as prescriptive, and at the polar opposite, spontaneous.¹¹

Parallels between Taoist calligraphic improvisation and an example of Minimalist artist, Donald Judd's improvisations upon the oblong at Marfa, Texas,¹² as a representation of 'non-meaning', beyond language, will be examined in Chapter Five. Judd's Minimalist installation art is arguably an example of the rhizomic influence of Taoism on contemporary visual art practice.¹³ Other examples of improvisation in contemporary, experimental visual arts will be cited to demonstrate the continuation of graphic improvisation as a vehicle for meaning in contemporary, cross cultural, visual arts.¹⁴ In Chapter Six an installation that deploys improvisation upon calligraphic characters will be examined, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, to show how this Taoist art form still resonates as an inspiration to contemporary artists.¹⁵

BACKGROUND

My interest in Taoist longevity characters began in 1998 in Hué, Vietnam, where many different 'symbols' that all signified longevity were observed. In 2000 I returned to Hué to document these prolific examples of variations upon the longevity character, to assemble a comprehensive archive.¹⁶

⁹ Khai Dinh was the twelfth emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam and reigned for nine years (1916 – 1925).

¹⁰ I refer to the unadorned, original longevity character used in everyday script as the 'common' longevity character throughout the document.

¹¹ See page 5. Karl E. Weick, *Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis*, for the *Special Issue: Jazz Improvisation and Organizing*. Organisation Science, Vol. 9, No. 5 (Sept. – Oct.). Pp 543 – 555.

¹² Donald Judd, Untitled (1982- 1986. One hundred aluminium oblongs installed in two ex-army artillery sheds in Marfa, Texas, in the Chinati Foundation's collection. This artwork was viewed during fieldwork in 2003 and 2008.

¹³ Deleuze, Giles; Guattari, Félix 1993. *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by B. Massumi: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁴ The other examples are: in this chapter, Bonita Ely, *Juggernaut*, 1999; in Chapter Five, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, 1987 - 1991. The processes and content of artwork produced by Bonita Ely during the candidacy pertaining to the influences of Taoist precepts will be analysed in Chapter Seven.

¹⁵ Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* was produced between 1987 and 1991. The mediums are: woodblock prints, wood, leather, ivory, string, cloth. 19 boxes: 49.2 x 33.5 x 9.8cm (each, containing four books). Installation's dimensions variable.

¹⁶ Research was conducted in consultation with Dr. Phan Thuan Anh, Director of Research at the Hué Monuments Conservation Centre, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Project. This was the first extensive research project undertaken of Hué's longevity characters. The research outcomes of this field trip were published in the article, *Longevity In Hué* (2001), TAASA Review: the Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia, Vol. 9, No. 3. CDs of the documented longevity characters were donated to the archives of the Hué Monuments Conservation Centre.

Amongst artists and calligraphers during the Sung Dynasty [960-1279] there was a flowering of this uniquely non-figurative visual art discipline. Because of this development, which was augmented by the Taoist alchemic search for an elixir of life, the character that signifies longevity (*shou* in Chinese, *tho* in Vietnamese) became the subject of prolific graphic improvisation. It was often paired with the character that signifies happiness, or felicity, (*fu*, Chinese, or *phuoc* in Vietnamese) in grids of ten by ten characters, equalling one hundred longevity and one hundred happiness characters positioned side by side. Common forms of the characters adorn artefacts and architecture, functioning as mystical and secular talismans to promote a long, happy life.¹⁷ For the purposes of this research, I have chosen to study the longevity character as it was by far the most prolific in Hué.

A HISTORY OF SINICISATION IN VIETNAM¹⁸

Throughout its history Vietnam has been repeatedly invaded and occupied by China. Sinicisation was imposed with varying degrees of force and was always resisted vigorously, so Vietnam retained a strong cultural identity despite the strong influence of China's two indigenous philosophies, Taoism and Confucianism. Ch'en, or Zen Buddhism spread to Vietnam from China in the north and over time became the most widespread and popular religion. The invader's ontology and religion flourished alongside the pantheistic animism of indigenous Vietnamese peoples. Vietnamese folklore absorbed the foreigners' mystical mythologies; hybridity increased as each belief system became integrated into the others' religious cosmology, philosophy, practices and iconography. During the Nguyen Era, bonzes such as Phuc Dien Trin Hué and An Thien wrote treatises that identify similarities between Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism to reconcile their differences.¹⁹ This supports the premise of this thesis that Taoism's applicability to other indigenous philosophies and religions broadened its scope in East Asia as well as in the West. The bonze, An Thien expresses this universality when he wrote to Dao Giao Nguyen Luu:

Why say there are three religions when they are in fact only one? If one fails to compare them, they are one, if one wants to compare them they are three ... the saints create doctrine depending on circumstances, forces, the times, and the state.²⁰

¹⁷ Legeza, I., *Tao Magic: the Secret Language of Diagrams and Calligraphy*. 1975, Thames and Hudson, London.

¹⁸ Some of the material in this section has been published previously. See Ely, B. 2001, *Longevity In Hué*, TAASA Review: the Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia Vol. 9 (No. 3).

¹⁹ Bonze: the head monk or resident monk in a temple. Also used for any Buddhist monk or priest. *Bozu* in Japanese. From Helen Josephine Baroni, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2002), Pub. The Rosen Publishing Group. P 33.

²⁰ Minh Chi, Ha Van Tan, Nguyen Tai Thu, *Buddhism In Vietnam: From Its Origins to the C19th*. (1999). Gioi Publishers, Hanoi. P 212.

In 1802, the Nguyen Imperial Dynasty (1802-1945) united for the first time in two centuries the many conflicting political factions that made up Vietnam. The choice of a central location from which to unify the country led to the creation of the city of Hué as the site for the Imperial City. The Nguyen Dynasty's power base was always precarious so they adopted the political control of the Chinese Confucian civic order that places the Emperor at the pinnacle of authority, with the military and civic mandarins, courtiers, bonzes and citizens subservient to those in the hierarchy above them.²¹

Although some Emperors were devout Ch'en Buddhists,²² others saw the grass roots popularity of Buddhism, the strength of community in pagodas, and the authority of bonzes, as a threat to their power. It was therefore in the pagodas' best interests to make conspicuously felicitous references to the Emperor in iconography adorning their architecture and material culture, such as the Taoist longevity characters that quote the dragon, the symbol that signifies the Emperor.

The patronage of Buddhist monasteries by devout members of the Imperial family, powerful courtiers and mandarins supported a tradition of esoteric scholarship. The compulsory mastery of Chinese calligraphy exposed Vietnam's Buddhist monks to other Taoist practices such as geomancy, divination, and shaminist magic. They studied Taoist texts, such as the *I Ching*²³ alongside Ch'en Buddhist teachings and the art of *mao bi* brush technique. But by 1920 the vernacular use of calligraphic text in Vietnam had been replaced by a Latinised phonetic alphabet, modified by a system of accents to signify tones, which had been devised in the early years of European contact by French Jesuit priest, Alexandre de Rhodes [1591-1660]. Thus Buddhist schools remained important centres for Taoist calligraphic studies and the continuation of improvised calligraphy as a Vietnamese art form, which continues today (Fig 5).

²¹ Ibid, p 180

²² Ibid, p184

²³ *I Ching*; or *Book of Changes*. Pantheon Books [1961, c1950. The Richard Wilhelm translation rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes. New York] with Introduction by Karl Jung.



Fig 5: A monk at Tien Mu, one of Hue's Buddhist temples, demonstrating calligraphy.
Photo: B. Ely, 2000

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE LONGEVITY CHARACTER

Chinese characters are composed of several combinations of different ways of forming ideograms. Some are like pictograms that depict in simple line drawings the objects or common phenomena to which they refer. Others are combined lines that express an abstract quality or idea, such as 'end', or 'one'. Compound ideograms combine existing characters using an association between the two to make another word, for example a rising sun behind a tree signifies 'east'. Other characters combine a pictographic character with another character, that when spoken sounds like the meaning as a 'clue'.²⁴ The common character meaning 'longevity' is a combination of six pictograms. It is a complex, poetic combination of pictograms, typical of Chinese calligraphy's compound characters.



The longevity character's constructed meaning can be analysed thus:

²⁴ Jean Francois Billiter, (1990) *The Chinese Art of Writing*. Original edition, Rizzoli International Publications.

1. At the top, one central vertical line is intersected symmetrically by two horizontal lines, the lower line longer than the upper (shown shorter here). This pictogram signifies 'a talented or gifted person, a gentleman' (*shi*).
2. Below this, a single horizontal line with a short vertical "T-bar" at the left end and a short downward stroke at the right end signifies 'a house, cover, or roof' (*gai*).
3. Below this, an "H"-like shape, lying on its side, signifies 'the skilled workman, or craftsman, or worker' (*gong*).
4. Below this, a single horizontal line signifies 'the numeral, one, or unity' (*yi*).
5. Below this, at the bottom left, is an open square shape consisting of a vertical stroke to the left of a "U" shape on its side that signifies 'mouth' (*kou*).
6. Beside this, on the bottom right, is a back-to-front "t"-like shape, with a dot beside it, that signifies 'a unit of measurement' for land (*cuen*).

Together, the six components signify the word longevity. It could be said that these elements come together poetically as the practical prerequisites for a long life – creativity, respect and status, a house or security, gifted people to do work for you, unity, a voice (maybe nourishment?), a piece of land. These pictograms present the creative calligrapher with six elements to endlessly, exponentially, play with, as we shall see below, just as visual artists creatively play graphic improvisational games with thematic elements.

IMPROVISATION – CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

In this section 'graphic improvisation' will be defined, and graded levels of creativity established, culminating in free improvisation. Arguably, these expressive dimensions are the reason calligraphy so fittingly exemplifies the process of graphic improvisation, for it embodies a central Taoist precept that unified, or holistic reality is continuously transforming, a concept expressed by the correlative binaries, continuity and change.

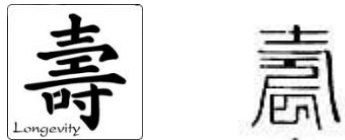
The word improvisation is rooted in the word "proviso" which means to make a stipulation beforehand ... By adding the prefix "im" to the word proviso ... [it] means the opposite... Thus improvisation deals with the unforeseen, it works without prior stipulation, it works with the unexpected".²⁵

Improvisation is characterised by qualities of unity in transformation, continuity in change, and aptly defines both the essence of graphic improvisation as it is referred to in this thesis as an influence on experimental contemporary art, and the essence of calligraphic art.

²⁵ A definition from Karl E. Weick's Introductory Essay, *Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis*, for the *Special Issue: Jazz Improvisation and Organizing*. *Organisation Science*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (Sept. – Oct.). Pp 543 – 555.

In his article, *Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis*, Karl E. Weick grades the creative process into four quantitative degrees of improvisation:²⁶

1/ INTERPRETATION: The artist interprets a known subject, often using plans, drawings, sketches and maquettes to prepare for the execution of a pre-planned artwork. For example, the pictograms that make up the common form of the longevity character are recognisable in this degree of improvisation:



2/ EMBELLISHMENT: Embellishment requires a greater use of the imagination with departures from predictable or prescriptive themes, compositions or narratives.²⁷ For example, here the pictograms have been inverted, joined and extended, so that resemblance to the common form is in relation to previous improvisations, such as the extensions above.



3/ VARIATION: The relationship to traditional themes, subjects and narratives is still evident, but are emphasised or extracted as subjects in their own right²⁸. For example one pictogram is emphasised with reference to others so that the relationship to the common form is retained sufficiently for this to signify *longevity*.



4/ IMPROVISATION: Improvisation is more than a paraphrase, modification or embellishment of existing motifs. The artist radically alters conventional forms or completely departs from known subjects, methods, genres and styles. The artist deploys methods of representation to make entirely new creations from the imagination and the properties of the medium, which may also have no precedent in convention. For example here the improvised version has departed so far from the common form it is readable only because of a familiarity with previous improvisational incarnations of the longevity character.



²⁶ I have used examples of longevity characters to clearly illustrate the process.

²⁷ Ibid. P 545.

²⁸ Ibid. P 545.

A command of the traditional discipline, continuity, combined with a radical, uninhibited disregard or irreverence of its conventions to discover new forms, change, harnessing chance as an ally rather than hindrance, characterise the true improvisation of Taoist calligraphy that has inspired the imaginations of Western artists.³⁶⁹ The following descriptions of Taoist practices and beliefs reads like a textbook for graphic improvisation upon the theme, *continuity and change* - including the immersion in mental and corporeal oneness, continuity, with the ephemeral qualities of process and medium attained by the Abstract Expressionists - including Donald Judd's spontaneous drawing up of multiple variations upon the interior space of the oblong, discussed in depth in the next chapter:

Tao is the "way": something underlying the change and transformation of all beings, the spontaneous process regulating the natural cycle of the universe.²⁹
This movement of transformation is ceaseless, spontaneous, moving through phases...³⁰

We can intuit the truth that reality is ... a seamless web of eternal change... 'being' and 'non-being' are complementary.³¹

Similarly, Isabelle Robinet's description of Taoist beliefs apply equally to Abstract Expressionist painting, calligraphy and the Minimalist sculptors' serial forms:

... transformations are unceasing and the possibilities of change through repetition, renewal, and rediscovery are innumerable. This is an active circular process.... There is a strong idea of progress, of stages, and of development, but more in the unfolding of the destiny of creatures, things and events than that in the world itself... a constant renewal is underway, shown in the different successive forms taken by various versions of truth, the constantly changing appearances...³²



²⁹ Laszlo Legeza, (1975) *Tao Magic: The Secret Language of Diagrams and Calligraphy*. Original edition, Thames and Hudson, London. P 22.

³⁰ Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (1993), translated by Karen C. Duval, University of California Press.

³¹ Laszlo Legeza, *Tao Magic: the Secret Language of Diagrams and Calligraphy* (1975), Thames and Hudson, London.

³² Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*. Translated by Phyllis Brooks. Stanford (Cal.): Stanford University Press, 1997. P 14.

Fig 6: Many different longevity characters adorn Chua Thien Mu's cast bronze bells in Hué.



Fig 7: These latticed windows signify both Taoism and Buddhism. (Left) The longevity character is octagonal, signifying the eight ways of Buddhist practice, combined with fumes and bats symbolising the Emperor and happiness respectively. (Right) This longevity character combines with swastikas, the symbol of Buddha.

To summarise, in Taoism the world (reality) remains a unified yet ever changing harmony of opposing forces. This resolution of dualities to make a whole is expressed in calligraphy as a fluid relationship between spatiality and mark making, and unending improvisations upon a singular figure. The significance of this for the representation of meaning will be discussed in the following section.

DELEUZE, REPRESENTATION, SUBJECTIVITY, CONTEXT

This section focuses on correlating the matrix of subjective “knowledge, recognitions, associations”,³³ the cultural, metaphysical and physical factors in Taoism, that combine in Taoist calligraphy with Deleuze’s theory of representation for the interpretation of experimental contemporary art (page 21). It is known that these Taoist qualities have influenced Western Modernists, such as Picasso, and Abstract Expressionists, such as Robert Motherwell (page 62). Subjective responses to art arise from an individual’s memories, personal experiences and personality, which sometimes obscure the stated intension of the artist to such an extent that an entirely new dimension is revealed about the artwork’s capacity as a catalyst for thought. Deleuze described the structure of this effect as:

... the rhizome in opposition to the tree, a rhizome-thought instead of an arborescent thought ...³⁴

³³ Gilles Deleuze (1968) *Repetition and Difference*. New York: Columbia University Press.

³⁴ Ibid. Preface to the English Edition, P xvii.

In Deleuze's theory there are no right or wrong responses as all associative thought is interconnected through the conduit of the artwork. From Deleuze's perspective, when viewing Hué's calligraphy, another significant basis for an interpretation of the different longevity characters' encoding is the context in which they appear with their known vernacular and esoteric knowledge bases, history, cultural encoding, and traditional functions. This enmeshing of all things in Deleuze's theory, and Taoist ontology, is reflected in the principles of installation art where the significance of context shifts the artwork's meaning, subjectively, associatively, as all perceptions are relational. Viewers engaging with artworks of this cosmological ilk could be said to experience a cathartic effect, as they place the viewer in a cognizant dimension where a sense of self is heightened, paradoxically, by an immersion in perceptions of a reality of universal dimensions, the 'I', not 'I' of Zen Buddhism. Girardot tells us Taoism expresses existentialist and cosmological problems not through a "doctrine of immortality", or "salvation", but by placing into perspective the destructive disharmonies humanity's delusional thinking may cause for the psyche, "the sickness and entropy of ordinary human life ... man is destructively out of harmony with the organic and communal life-rhythm of the Tao."³⁵

Cosmic, cathartic qualities are remarked upon by viewers of Donald Judd's *Untitled* installation in Marfa Texas where the essence of Taoism may be discerned in the aesthetic and methodological composition of his improvised sculpture.

In Taoism, everything is an intrinsic part of the Taoist whole, of infinity, "the 'emptiness' of the undifferentiated"³⁶ so no transcendental solution is possible – humans are not a special case. In essence Taoism is a secular philosophy that puts us in our place. Consequently longevity characters have a "medicinal", or cathartic, rather than spiritual function – promoting "psychic and bodily health" to maintain a balanced wholeness in human nature and society, where conflicted binaries are resolved, equalised. The marriage of yin (the ONE) and yang (plus one is TWO – opposition and discord) is a metaphor for the THIRD state, a co-existence and co-penetration of opposites, where liminal in-between exists, in which there is dynamic, synthesised truth. A life lived to achieve longevity is more likely to have this balance and connection to 'concordant discord', creativity. These cathartic qualities are arguably present in Western artworks derived from the same creative process deployed by the calligrapher to invest the artwork with *ch'i*, the universal life force. Placed amongst Buddhist, animist, secular and Christian paraphernalia, Taoist knowledge and practice is meshed into the fabric of

³⁵ N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, 1983, University of California Press. P 42.

³⁶ N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, 1983, University of California Press. P 42.

Vietnamese life. These are the “knowledge, recognitions, associations”, the contexts and meanings, of Deleuze’s responding ‘I’.

The following applications of Deleuze’s theory of representation to Hué’s Taoist longevity characters as cultural signifiers is arguably a method that carries over to the interpretation of contemporary experimental art, which developed in part from the West’s exposure to Taoist philosophy and cultural practices, a rhizomic connection that will be followed in detail in following chapters.

CALLIGRAPHY AS A SIGNIFIER IN HUÉ

The following section demonstrates how Taoism has been seamlessly adapted to the metaphysical belief systems of Vietnam as an over arching philosophy of practical and ontological applications. In this respect its flexibility illustrates how Deleuze’s pluralistic theory of representation works in practice when applied to the porosity of the Tao.

The tradition of inventing calligraphic characters is a Chinese art form that has its origins in animist beliefs and their influence upon Taoist practices.³⁷ Secret diagrams, talismans, and characters were believed to be mystical mediums containing spirits that could be called upon to aid or protect people from misfortunes such as evil forces, illnesses, natural disasters, and malicious acts. Because the configurations were secret, the artist/priest often strategically transgressed the rules governing Chinese brush technique, creating free, nonconformist ideograms that were sometimes performed by illiterate writers whose interpolations further modified their origins in conventional written form. Contextualised in an animist belief system, the longevity characters’ significance changes from text to magic.

My fieldwork in 2000 revealed that this cultural hybridity has complicated and extended the meaning of longevity characters in Hué as they proliferate in Taoist, Animist, Christian and Buddhist contexts, places of worship. These decorative motifs appear on the most sacred architecture, shrines, temple bells, ritual paraphernalia and furnishings. For example the garments of Buddha and bodies of animist spirits are invariably inscribed with longevity characters.

The multitude of calligraphic references to longevity in Imperial iconography and architecture in Hué are expressions of felicitation and subservience to the Emperor in the Confucian system of civic order. But also, they refer to the belief that the Emperors attained immortality

³⁷ Laszlo Legeza, *Tao Magic: the Secret Language of Diagrams and Calligraphy* (1975). Thames and Hudson, London. Pp 19 – 21.

after their death, no doubt with the help of Taoist calligraphy as talismans. The Citadel, the Emperors' residence, and their elaborate mausoleums, feature a multitude of different longevity characters.³⁸

Ancestor worship, with its obligations to family and reverence for the aged members of the community is also integral to Vietnamese culture. As an expression of a connectedness to life's continuity, ancestor worship brings subtle nuances to notions of longevity and imbues the longevity character with an emotional dimension.

Taoism is a pragmatic, non theistic belief system concerned with day to day matters as much as cosmology. A long happy life is a practical aim in life. The Chinese characters signifying longevity as a reminder and talisman, are inscribed commonly on secular clothing, objects, artefacts, architecture, and public places, such as the family business and home. Scrolls, greeting cards, jewellery and such like inscribed with longevity are common gifts.

Surprisingly given Vietnam's fraught colonial history, some longevity characters use the French fleur de li as a motif (*Fig 8*). The style of European art deco was also used in Hué.³⁹



Fig 8: Chua Bang Cu's longevity character featuring the fleur de li on a painted metal lattice. The fleur de li is the emblem of the French monarchy. Here the curling petals echo the dragon fume theme of many longevity characters that signify the Nguyen emperors. Photo. B. Ely, 2000

³⁸ See below, case study, Lang Khai Dinh.

³⁹ See Lang Khai Dinh.

The confluence of all these religious, historical, personal, cosmological factors have resulted in an extraordinarily rich repository of examples of multifarious longevity characters in Hué, to demonstrate French theorist, Deleuze's theory of representation.

CATEGORIES OF IMPROVISATION FOUND IN HUÉ

The following section looks at other strategies deployed by artists to enable such a profusion of variants that factor into the significance of Hué's longevity characters, just as these strategies do for all context based art forms such as installation art.

Artists and artisans in Hué have quoted the six pictograms that make up the common longevity character in isolation, absented them altogether, rearranged or distorted them, repeated and mirrored them. They have added to and subtracted, embellished, simplified and contextualised them. Donald Judd used similar methods designing the boxes for *Untitled* in Marfa, Texas. He composed variations within given parameters (continuity), by combining elements, subtracting, reversing, re-arranging them (page 179).

In a freestanding wooden frame on the alter of a small private shrine in the Chua Van Phuoc, a Taoist embroidery is on display which demonstrates other aspects of improvised calligraphy not seen in the previous architectural examples (*Fig 9*). All the characters are depicted in the "ancient" style of Chinese writing, called *co*. In this style each character fits within a rectangle and is the Chinese equivalent of printing, as opposed to cursive writing. All one hundred characters in the embroidery signify longevity.



Fig 9: Chua Van Phuoc, embroidery of one hundred longevity characters. Photo: B. Ely, 2000.

Firstly the edge of the embroidery is decorated with stylised dragon fumes that have multiple meanings; they signal a Confucian context for the characters. The dragon fumes refer to the creationist myth of ancient Vietnam in which the country was created by a dragon. They refer to the dragon that protects a sacred place or dwelling from evil spirits. They refer to the dragon as the ancient, mysterious creature that brings rain and a favourable crop. The fumes also refer to the Taoist concept of *ch'i*, the life force which is often symbolised by the curling smoke of burning incense.

All of these meanings contextualise the longevity characters. We shall see in Chapter Six where Xu Bing's artwork *Book from the Sky*, derived from calligraphic conventions is analysed, that signs on the margins signify an honouring of ancient knowledge and scholarship (page 194). The embroidery of longevity characters signify for the chua Van Phuoc community the pagoda's standing as a centre of scholarship in Vietnam's ancient tradition of pedagogy.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Vietnam's first university was established in Hanoi in 1076. Called Van Mieu, the Temple of Literature, it has eighty-two stelae, each inscribed with a commemoration of the achievements of the university's doctoral alumni

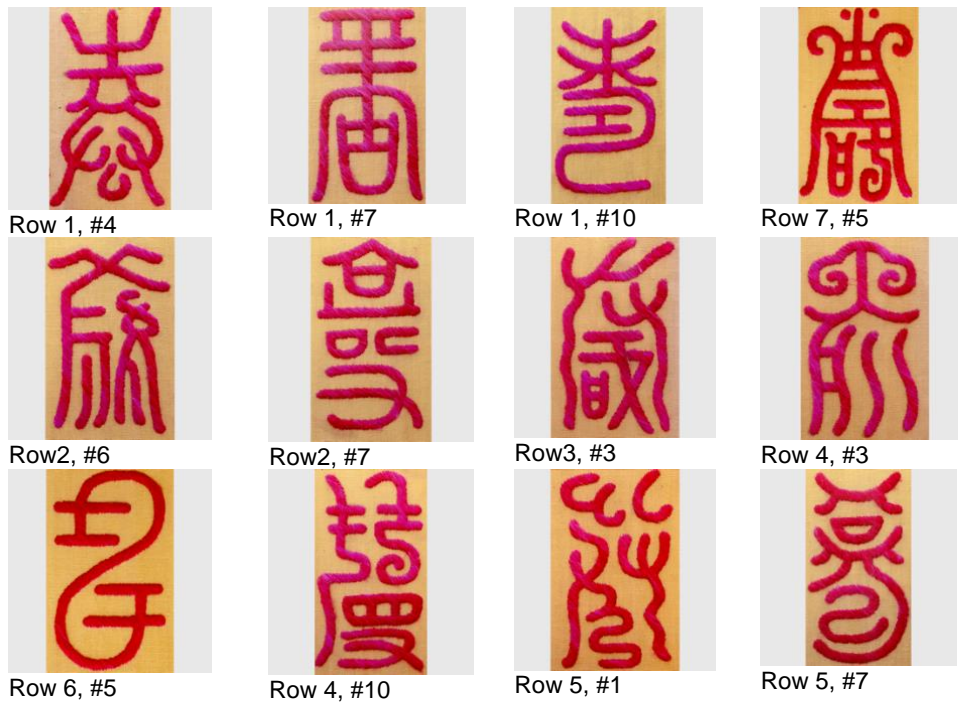


Fig 10: These longevity characters have departed a long way from the common longevity character. Some are abstract, others bring to mind imagery such as landscape, dancing, martial arts. Photo: B. Ely, 2000.

The improvised text is sometimes only recognisably related to the common longevity character if the viewer has knowledge of the range of its previous permutations, which can be far removed from their source. The characters' permutations can be self referential, austere, ornamental, non figurative. The examples above have an obscure relationship to the common longevity character (*Fig 10*). The pictograms bottom left and right originate from the t-like character that signifies 'measurement', and the top two quote other permutations of the upper pictograms of the common longevity character, but as a pictorial composition the character resembles dynamic forms signifying the Taoist's reverence for nature and creativity. Thus the invented characters may be stylisations of figurative Taoist iconography, ritual, paraphernalia, and places of contemplation such as the body, constellations, architectural structures (temples), sacred dance diagrams, landscape, trees, the vessel or gourd symbolising longevity.

The characters are sewn in a meticulous satin stitch; red silk thread on yellow cotton cloth. The Taoist symbolism of colour has its origins in *feng shui's* five elements of nature, believed

set upon the shells of tortoises, symbolic of longevity. Hué also has a Temple of Literature, with avenues of similarly inscribed stone stelae on tortoises.

to be the source of all phenomena.⁴¹ Red signifies the element fire, puberty, energy, good fortune and joy. Yellow symbolises the earth, the centre, the emperor, and summons the *yin* and *yang*. The same style of embroidery frames an alter in a Taoist temple in Beijing (*Fig 11, Fig 12*).



Fig 11: The alter in the Taoist, White Cloud Temple, in Beijing has exactly the same style of calligraphy as the embroidered screen in the Van Phuoc pagoda in Hué, Vietnam, showing the enormity of Taoism's reach in East Asia. Photo: B. Ely, 2008

The following examples of characters from this hanging show their pictographic qualities derived from Taoist iconography, such as landscape, the body, the sage, architecture, the vessel. They show the role of the imagination in Taoist art forms to create a meshing of nuanced, polylinear imagery that creates in the mind of the viewer the same infinity of inter-relationships as Taoism figures in the makeup of the universe. The characters also demonstrate Taoist calligraphy's graphic abstraction and the dynamic quality of line in Taoist calligraphy that influenced Modernist artists in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

⁴¹ Also, black signifies the element air, therefore water, wind, heaven and sky. White signifies metal, purity, gold, fullness, the adult years of life. Green symbolises the element wood, therefore spring and vitality.



Fig 12: Detail of the White Cloud Temple's embroidery in Beijing showing a diversity of characters of great imaginative invention, evoking Taoist iconography such as the vessel, architecture, landscape, dancing. Photo: B. Ely, 2008.

The "precious gourd" in *feng shui*, considered a receptacle of good fortune⁴² is often referenced in the shape of actual metal urns, which then signify longevity. Many vessels in pagodas reflect this shape and are adorned with longevity characters.



Fig 13: Bas relief mosaics in the mausoleum of Emperor Kai Dinh, Hué. The urn (left) and vase (centre) quote gourd shaped longevity characters, and are inscribed with longevity characters. (Right) The crane and tortoise signify longevity. Photo: B. Ely, 2000.

Another bewilderingly ubiquitous reference to Taoist longevity is incorporated into the symbolic design of decorative borders⁴³. These are found on architectural features, furniture,

⁴² <http://altreligion.about.com/library/glossary/symbols/bldefsgourd.htm> Cited August, 2007.

⁴³ *L'Art à Hué*, new edition. Originally authorised by the Association of the Friends of Hué, (French), now distributed at the Citadel, Hué.

family graves, planters for bonsai, scrolls, religious paraphernalia, metal work, ceramics, textiles; inlay, carving, embroidery, lattice work, filigree, appliqué... The horizontal format combines quotation of the pictogram at the top of the common longevity character, depicted by curling flowers, tendrils and leaves of symbolic plants, for example the chrysanthemum which symbolises good luck and a life of ease, which in turn quotes the curling fumes of the Imperial dynasty's dragon, or the swirling smoke of incense signifying ch'i, the life force. The calligraphy is often accompanied by traditional imagery symbolic of longevity, such as the crane, the tortoise, an old man accompanied by a young maiden, or the bat, symbolic of happiness (Fig 14).

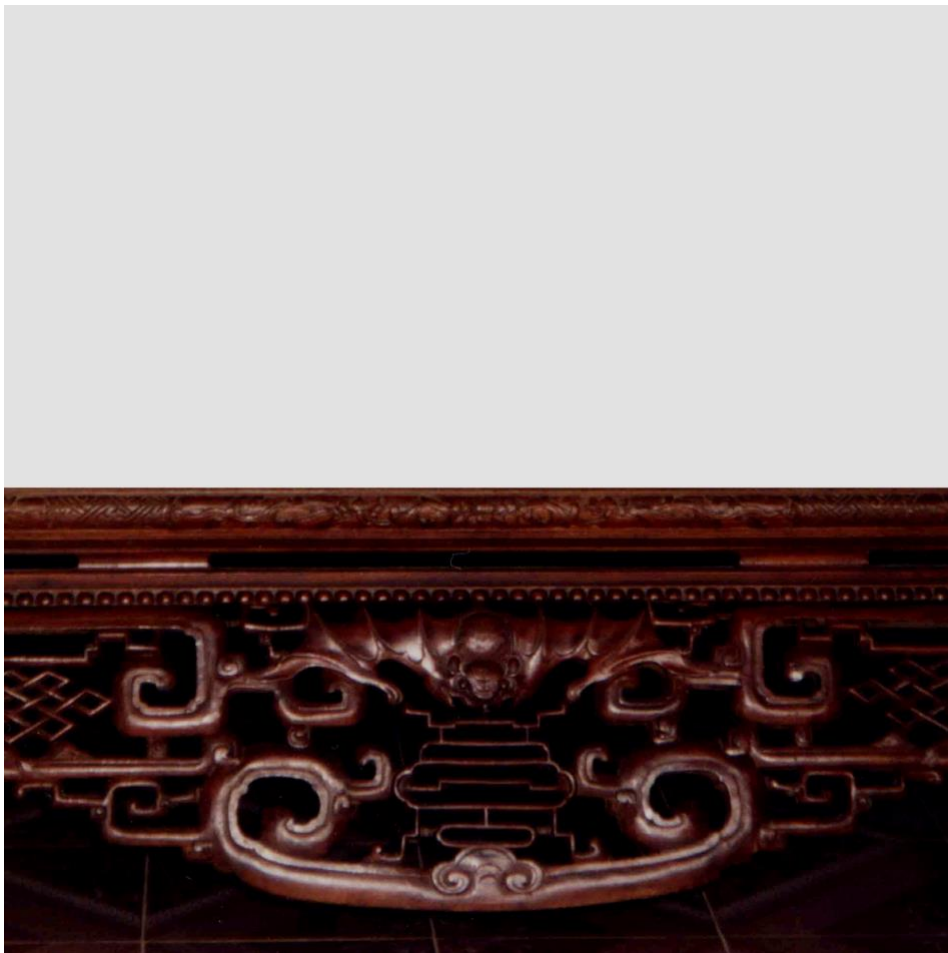


Fig 14: Chua Tuong Van, wood carving on the edge of a table. Plant tendrils like dragon fumes are combined with a bat signifying 'happiness'. The central longevity character is a curvilinear vessel shape.
Photo: B. Ely, 2000

Certain plants signify longevity, such as the pine tree, and are grown in gardens surrounding pagodas, or as bonsai in pots, which are adorned with longevity characters.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The peach tree, pine tree, tortoise, crane, stork, dove, stag, and bamboo all symbolise longevity.

Buildings, such as the Citadel's architecture, the Emperors' mausoleums and Buddhist pagodas, as well as contemporary domestic and commercial architecture feature mandala shaped windows with lattices that configure longevity characters (Fig 15). Mandalas are symbols of totality and continuity in Buddhism, but here feature Taoist text signifying longevity, an example of cultural hybridity. The latticed windows filter the light, illuminating interior spaces with a mysterious, transcendent quality. These longevity mandalas are also woven into textiles, and adorn domestic items, such as crockery and tiles.



Fig 15: Chua Truong Lac, window lattice. Circular (mandala), angular longevity character with spherical spacers. Photo: B. Ely, 2000.

Longevity characters are configured to fit architectural or geometric formats – the octagon, square, rectangle, and ellipse. For example, in Emperor Minh Mang's mausoleum alongside the Perfume River, geometric figures are used to inscribe the landscaped garden. On either side of a straight path there are raised, symmetrical garden beds in the shape of squared off spirals that represent the upper section of a longevity character (*Fig 16, Fig 17*). In the centre of each there are plantings of particular long living, evergreen palms that also signify longevity.

The straight, central path continues to a sacred bridge across a lake to Minh Mang's sepulchre, a circular "earth work" mound that represents Heaven. The architecture and landscaping of each Emperor's mausoleum have symbolic or poetic significance, but Minh Mang is the only Emperor who inscribed the landscape with longevity text. In the mid twentieth century, cultural inscriptions of landscape derived from Taoist garden art informed the development of 'earth works', which were foreshadowed by gardens inscribed with Taoist themes.⁴⁵

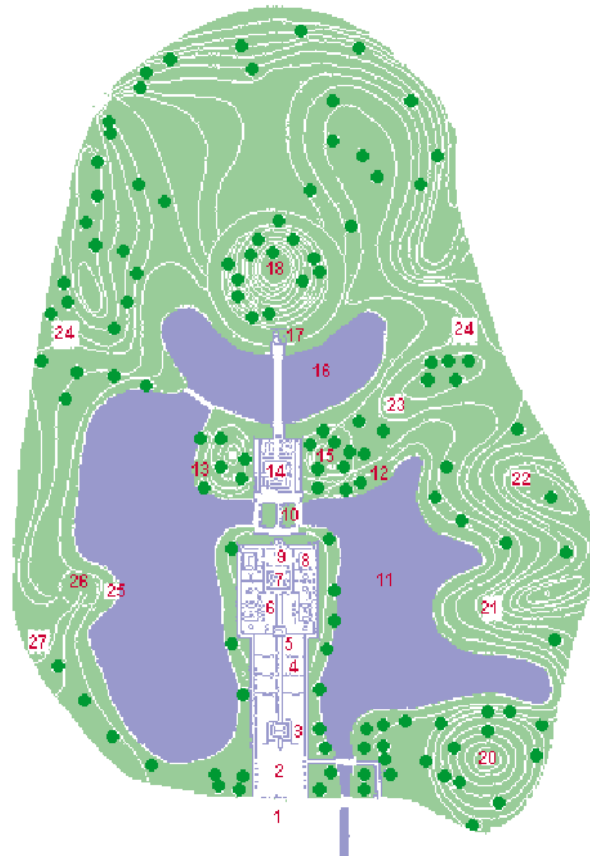


Fig 16: Plan of Minh Mang's tomb. KEY - #14, Landscaping in the shape of a longevity character; #16 Sacred bridge between Heaven and Earth; #18 Circular grave symbolising the Heaven/sky where the Emperor returns after death.

⁴⁵ See Chapter Two and Five. See also David A. Slawson's *Secret Teachings in the Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles, Aesthetic Values* (1987), Kodansha, New York, Chapter 4, *The Art We See: Cultural Values*.



Fig 17: Minh Mang's tomb showing the distant mound-shaped sepulchre, the sacred bridge and the longevity character's squared off, scroll shaped plantings in the foreground on the left.

Another example of this provenance in Taoist garden art for earth works and installation art is found in Slawson's *Secret Teachings in the Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles, Aesthetic Values*.⁴⁶ He describes different qualities of rocks in Japanese gardens, which were given poetic names, including rocks signifying Chinese symbols of longevity. These rocks resemble the turtle, smooth, recumbent, mound-shaped, and the crane, jagged vertical rocks reflective of the folded cranes of origami. When placed together, they form an aesthetic of contrasts resonant of the qualities of *yin* and *yang*, a conceptualisation of forms from nature and the placement of objects in space.

Emperor Khai Dinh's mausoleum is an example of Vietnamese imperial architecture adorned with a multiplicity of longevity characters in a modernist style. Built between 1920 and 1931, Emperor Khai Dinh's mausoleum was strongly influenced by French Art Deco so has a different aesthetic quality to the other imperial mausoleums in Hué. It stands as a testament to the conflicted history of Vietnam's French colonial past, exacerbated by Emperor Lang Khai Dinh's collaboration with the French occupiers of Vietnam during his reign. It is also an example of the 'return' to Asia of a Western style of design that was initially influenced by Asian art.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid. Pp 128 – 129.

⁴⁷ See Chapter Two.

At the entrance of the mausoleum, rectangular longevity characters in bas-relief are contained within horizontal panels along the stairways' balusters (Fig 18).



Fig 18: Art deco decoration on the Khai Dinh's mausoleum's stairs.

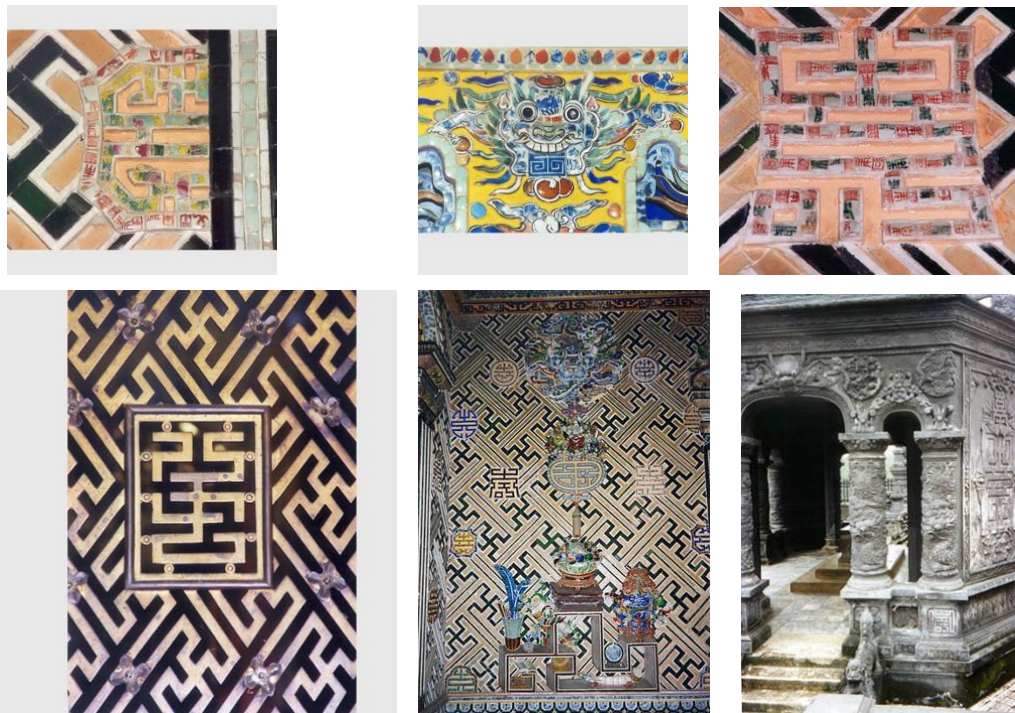


Fig 19: Emperor Khai Dinh's art deco mausoleum: (Top left) Example of a European crest shaped longevity character. (Top centre) A dragon with a longevity character in its mouth. (Top right) Tiny longevity characters are inscribed on the crockery mosaic. (Top right) (Bottom left) Metal lattice with longevity characters and swastikas. (Bottom centre) Mosaics of swastikas and longevity characters cover the walls of the inner sanctum. (Bottom right) Dragons and longevity characters adorn the pagola housing the stele inscribed with Khai Dinh's obituary.

The interior of the mausoleum is lined with brilliantly coloured mosaics made from broken crockery and glass (Fig 19). A continuous pattern of interlocking, black swastikas across the

walls and ceilings of three large tiled rooms signify Buddha. The pattern is punctuated by a multitude of different longevity characters configured in geometric shapes of the circle, square, rectangle, ellipse, and the European crest shape.



Fig 20: Golden statue of the Emperor, Khai Dinh, located in the inner chamber of his mausoleum.

The presence of a life sized gilded statue of the Emperor sitting transfixed upon his golden throne is contextualised by this extraordinary incantation in Taoist text (*Fig 20*).

The creative diversity surrounding the citing of longevity in Hué is a creative outcome of precepts concerning ceaseless change that in Taoism is integral to universality. The familiarity of the iconography and the subjective desire for a long life complicates this cultural blending along with the superstition attached to the character as a talisman. These practical aspects of Taoism arguably enhance the synthesis of religions and cultural nuance in countries with a Taoist culture, such as China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam where ritual, iconography and belief systems are merged, appropriated or inter-related. Ancient Vietnamese animists and spirits meet the Hindu kingdom of Champa meets ancestor worship; Confucius meets Buddha meets Lao Tzu meets Catholicism meets Communism. These complexities of context foreshadowed metonymic signifiers in experimental installation art in the second half of the twentieth century, and the hybridity of recent globalised art. But calligraphy's artistry perhaps above all was an exemplar for a decommissioned freedom of expression for Western artists who were restrained by the demands of patrons, by the confines of realism, and the bounds of thematic convention.

In contrast, the following two chapters focus on the installation artworks of two artists, Donald Judd and Xu Bing, who have employed improvisation in their process of planning and production, but little attention has been given to the question of the cultural origins of this

process. Judd's refusal to pin point any definitive sources or meaning for his artwork ruled out his public acknowledgement of any such interests and influences. For Xu Bing, the Cultural Revolution and its pragmatic aftermath ruled out associations with China's ancient traditions until recently. Both artists' artworks reside in the silence that surrounds Taoism as an influence on Western visual arts that this thesis addresses. Two installations by these artists, and the artists' life experiences will be examined to determine oblique and direct infusions of Taoist precepts that have informed the meanings and processes of their representative examples of contemporary, experimental, visual art.

This chapter closes with analysis of an installation from my oeuvre titled *Juggernaut*, (1997) that correlates with Taoist calligraphy's creative methodology. In this artwork improvisational play upon the sphere is deployed in a representation of the theme, continuity and change (*Fig 21*).



Fig 21: Bonita Ely, *Juggernaut*, 1997. Plywood, brass fittings, talcum powder. 2.2 metres high, other dimensions variable. Installation, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane, 1997.

The piece was inspired by research of the cultural inscription of narrative onto landscape by the Ngaanyatjarra people of the Gibson Desert, Western Australia, and the inscription of the mythology of the Hindu pantheon upon the landscape surrounding Hampi, in Southern India.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For reports of the field research in India, see Bonita Ely, *The Spatiality of Hindu Temples, Southern India*, TAASA Review: the Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia, 1997, Vol. 6, No. 4, Pp 10 - 11. Also, Bonita Ely, (1998), *Juggernaut*, catalogue, Sutton Gallery, Object Gallery, Bellas Gallery.



Fig 22: Juggernaut's interior space showing improvisations upon the sphere, changing with each turn of the spiral (see catherine wheel shape). Installation, Asian Biennale of Contemporary Art, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1999.

Each turn of a plywood spiral transformed into a different configuration of a quartered sphere, by indenting the sections in as many ways as possible, such as the catherine wheel (*Fig 22*) and hour glass (*Fig 21*). The spiraling forms represented continuity, the differently shaped interior spaces, change, whilst the dusting of talcum powder onto the surface of the plywood resonated with viewers' olfactory memories of the intimate body, to problematise the interpretation of the installation.



Fig 23: Juggernaut, showing spacers to separate the turns of the spirals. Installation, Customs House, Sydney, 1999.

The spirals' turns were kept apart in tension by 'spacers' and the cylindrical forms were prevented from rolling across the floor by wedges at ground level, so the whole revolving, gigantist form had a sense of perilous impermanence (*Fig 23*). These ephemeral, subjective qualities were arguably derived from the indirect influences of Taoism on Western culture, reinforced by my on-going interest in exploring modes of expression of the precepts of Eastern philosophy.