The uses of visual images based on calligraphy and the depiction of the human body in Chinese art have served an important role in the exercise of political power by leaders in Chinese culture. The two media that are most closely linked to the exercise of political power in Chinese culture are written or performed calligraphy and representational art featuring the human figure. The latter is more familiar in western nations where one often finds sculptures of political figures displayed in prominent public spaces. However, in China calligraphy as a form of written art serves as a principle symbolic expression of political power. This is true in both traditional Chinese culture and the twentieth century revolutionary period and beyond. The connection between figurative political images and political power needs little explanation for a western audience. But how is calligraphy connected to the theme of the political body in Chinese art and culture? One answer is offered in Mao Zedong’s early writings, where he linked the practice of calligraphy to physical training of the body. Calligraphy as he understood it, “used the entire body to express the writer’s spirit.”

After a brief introduction to a Chinese understanding of the body in traditional Chinese culture, I will examine the political uses first, of calligraphy, and then of figurative representation. Figurative representation had a limited role in Chinese traditional cultures, apart from rituals and in portraiture. Nevertheless, figurative representation assumed a prominent role in the art of twentieth century China. Perhaps this shift was in part a consequence of the influence of western cultures where figuration has an important role, both in popular culture and fine arts. The adoption of Socialist Realism, a popular style of art in communist Russia, no doubt was one of the contributing factors. Our discussion of the political body in Chinese art will conclude with a look at the works of two contemporary Chinese artists, Xu Bing and Ma Bao Zhong, whose contemporary art offers a different under-

standing of the roles of calligraphy and visual representation with respect to political power.

I

In traditional Chinese culture, the body is seen primarily in the context of filial relations to family and, by extension, loyalty to the sovereign. The body is transmitted through the parents and enters into a set of relationships and obligations, first with family members. However, filial duties in Chinese culture extend beyond the immediate family in significant ways. This notion is expressed succinctly in the words of Li Chi, a third century BC disciple of Confucius: “If in serving the sovereign, he be not loyal, he is not filial. If in discharging the duties of office, he be not serious, he is not filial … If on the field of battle he be not brave, he is not filial.” The concept of hsiao (filial piety) thus constitutes the foundations of the traditional social and political systems in China. This concept of hsiao first developed when the Chinese were predominantly an agrarian society dependent on, and revering of, nature; it continues to influence the thinking and actions of Chinese people even today. Filial piety calls for a hierarchy of relationships with respect to family members and with respect to the sovereign. These relationships were built in part on the five virtues of Confucianism: jen (human heartedness), yi (righteousness), li (propriety, rituals, rules of proper conduct), chih (wisdom), and hsin (good faith).

II

To begin our consideration of the political role of calligraphy in politics, let us consider the actions of the Chinese statesman-poet Qu Yuan (343-278 BC). Qu Yuan attempted to institute reforms against corruption in the administration of the Chinese state of Chu by satirizing in his poems the “corruption, selfishness, and disregard for the people on the part of dubious characters who achieved trusted positions in the Imperial Court.” His actions resulted in banishment from the kingdom. When he felt unable to do anything to save his state, he

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