

## New forms of calligraphy in contemporary China

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Calligraphy is a central tenet of Chinese civilization. The whole history of China is strictly linked to the history of its writing and calligraphy. In contemporary times Calligraphy has undergone a radical change and it has evolved into new forms in all fields of visual and performing arts. This paper aims at analyzing how all these forms emerged in: 1) “fine and contemporary arts”, where it became, for example, a naïf painting made of pictographic shapes of characters, an abstract combination of dots and lines, a “light-calli-photograph,” or an artistic video based on digital strokes.; 2) decorative and applied arts, where the characters lost their connection with the linguistic meaning to become decorative elements used for commercial purposes or to design modern architectures; 3) performing arts, where the rhythm, dynamism and harmonic movement of calligraphy became a choreographic gesture of a contemporary ballet or a piece of classical music; and 4) graffiti art, where the presence of calligraphy along the streets evolved from Maoist propaganda posters into graffiti pieces made of wild-style characters or cursive tags. Proposing a media-based categorization and a new taxonomy of the contemporary calligraphic production, this article aims at demonstrating how these new forms powerfully resonate with China’s rich and enduring cultural tradition and at the same time mirror the sweeping cultural and economic changes that have taken place in China during the last decades.

**Keywords:** Calligraphy, Chinese calligraphy, contemporary Chinese art, contemporary Chinese calligraphy, calligraphy and performing arts, calligraphy and decorative arts, calligraphy and applied arts, calligraphy and graffiti art.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Calligraphy is a central tenet of Chinese civilization (Li 2009; Ledderose 1986). The history of China is intricately linked to the history of its writing and calligraphy (Ouyang and Fong 2008), and the emergence of new elements in the powerful and extremely coherent tradition of the calligraphic practice has always been an indicator of ongoing cultural changes (Scholmbs 1998; Harrist and Fong 1999; Kraus 1991). Art curator, historian, and critic Gao Minglu wrote: “The appearance of the characters is the appearance of culture. The critique of the characters is the critique of the culture, the reorganization of the characters is the reorganization of the cultures” (Gao 1998: 195).

Throughout history, writing has inevitably evolved into a mighty means of power and control; both its form and content are constantly modified to achieve these ends. Chinese culture is perhaps most receptive to writing as a form of self-expression, artistic code, and propaganda instrument simultaneously having an uninterrupted, three-thousand-year history of writing. In this regard, although many Chinese dialects exist, Chinese writing has inevitably evolved into a mighty means of unity and a common form of communication. Even if people cannot verbally communicate in different provinces, they can understand each other in writing. As a result, the art of calligraphy occupied a prominent place as the supreme form of visual art not only in its aesthetics but also in society (Ledderose 1986, Kraus 1991, Barrass 2002, Yen 2005, Wu 2008). In the last forty years, the uneven growth of the new commercial economy and the evolving politics of the Communist Party have “re-opened” China to the rest of the world and to a freer confrontation with its tradition. Since the 1990s, the opening-up policy of China, the advent of globalization, and increasing cross-cultural communication have strengthened the need to preserve the country’s artistic legacy, creating a virtual bridge between civilizations. Several Chinese artists re-imagined the calligraphic sign as a creative form of expression after the writing characters were erased. In this context, the art of calligraphy exploded into a plethora of different forms in all fields of visual and performing arts, reflecting the increasing cultural diversification of the Chinese society and its “fragmented and discontinuous nature” (Chen 2011: 59).

The first aim of this article is to propose a macro-categorization of these different forms, using a media-based classification into four categories, that are:

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<sup>1</sup> Every part of the article has been discussed and finalized together and cannot be considered as a composition of separately written parts. Only for academic purposes, we consider here that: Adriana Iezzi is the author of paragraphs 1 – 4; Marco Meccarelli is the author of paragraph 2.4. The introduction was written by the two authors.

1. “Fine and contemporary arts” (or simply “contemporary visual arts”): this is only a tentative label to include new forms of calligraphy (from the 80s until now) in the domain of the so called “fine arts”<sup>2</sup> (which means painting-like calligraphy, few characters calligraphy, abstract calligraphy, printmaking, seal carving, and sculpture) and “contemporary arts” (which means assemblage, collage, mixed-media, conceptual art, installation, photography, digital art, videoart, and land-art).<sup>3</sup>
2. Performing arts: new forms of performance art, contemporary dance, and music influenced by calligraphic aesthetics and practice.
3. Applied and decorative arts: i) artistic cross-fertilization of modern calligraphy with typical Chinese products such as ceramics; ii) use of calligraphy as a source of inspiration for graphic, industrial, and fashion design products and iii) for architecture.
4. Graffiti art: different forms of writings (Latin alphabet and Chinese characters) and styles (graffiti styles and calligraphic styles) in Chinese graffiti works.

In this article, we will focus in particular on the first category because is where we have collected the most data so far, but we will also briefly describe the other categories as well. For each category, we will give representative examples and define subcategories and trends in order to propose a new taxonomy and representation/classification of the artistic production. Drawing on a preliminary historical reconstruction of the phenomenon of “Chinese Modern Calligraphy” (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa* 中国现代书法), art criticism (also in the Sinophone sphere) and direct contact with the artists, the selection of the artworks follows six main criteria: innovation (at least one innovative element with respect to traditional calligraphy must be represented, in relation to content, support, tools/materials, concept, etc.), calligraphic vocation (calligraphic component/s must be predominant), impact (high impact/resonance in public audience/critical reviews), variety among the media-areas, chronology (sampling the timeline of the whole phenomenon from 1985 until today), and representativeness (artworks made by representative artists and representative of a current/trend). The theoretical concepts at the basis of this article are those of “intermedia” (Higgins 2001: 49-54) and “hybrid art forms” (Levinson 1984): in the selected artworks, calligraphy is only a component of intermedia works characterized by hybridization.

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<sup>2</sup> For the definition of “fine arts,” see the Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/fine-art> (22.03.2024).

<sup>3</sup> This is a provisional list of “contemporary arts” found and analysed so far, but are susceptible to adjustments and additions.

## 2. New forms of calligraphy in “Fine and contemporary arts”

### 2.1. First examples: manipulation of characters, space decomposition, and “pictorial” approach to calligraphy

The first examples of new forms of Chinese calligraphy in contemporary visual arts were displayed during the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy” (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa shouzhan* 中国现代书法首展), held in October 1985 at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing.

Seventy-two artworks were showcased and all 26 artists involved were members of the “Chinese Modern Painting and Calligraphy Association” (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa xuehui* 中国书法家学会) which was founded in July 1985 to organize this pivotal event. The most important calligraphers who took part in the exhibition were Huang Miaozi 黄苗子 (1913-2012), Zhang Ding 张仃 (1917-2010), and Li Luogong 李骆公 (1917-1992), who belong to the old generation of Chinese calligraphy masters, together with Gu Gan 古干 (1942-2020), Wang Xuezhong 王学仲 (1925-2013), Ma Chengxiang 马承祥 (b. 1937), Dai Shanqing 戴山青 (1944-2004) who were the promoters of the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Their works were neither calligraphies nor paintings (Liu 2000: 33), but they were something that participated both in calligraphy practice and painting conceptions.<sup>5</sup> Heavily influenced by contemporary Japanese calligraphy,<sup>6</sup> in particular by the “Few characters” (*shaozishu* 少字数) current and the “School of ink appearance” (*moxiang pai* 墨象派),<sup>7</sup> they focused their attention on the manipulation of (few) characters, the original/pictorial use of ink and the decomposition of the traditional space.

Two main examples of this type of works, displayed for the first time at the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy”, are *Shan cui* 山摧 (“The Mountains Are Breaking Up,” 1985, Fig. 1) by Gu Gan and *Li Bai shi* 李白诗 (“Li Bai’s Poem,” 1985, Fig. 2) by Su Yuanzhang 苏元章 (1924-2002). The *Mountains Are Breaking Up* (Fig. 1) is the most representative picture of this exhibition.

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of the exhibition planning process and the different phases of the exhibition, see Pu and Guo (2005: 19-24).

<sup>5</sup> The artworks displayed in the exhibition are gathered in the exhibition catalogue (Wang 1986).

<sup>6</sup> The influence of the Japanese avant-garde calligraphy on the Modernists was pointed out by several Chinese scholars such as Qu Lifeng (Qu 2008), Yang Yingshi (Yang 2004: 227), and Liu Canming (Liu 2000: 26-32).

<sup>7</sup> The “Few Characters” current, whose leader is Teshima Yūkei (1901-1987), is characterized by the use of few characters (or even only one character) in the calligraphic works, while the “School of Ink Appearance” focuses on the experimentation in the use of ink effects and in the spatial arrangement of the composition. For more details, see Chen (1999: 306).



Figure 1. Gu Gan, *Shan cui* 山摧 (“The Mountains Are Breaking Up”), 1985, ink on paper, 93.5 x 87.5 cm, London, British Museum. © British Museum

In this work, which drew inspiration from a poem by Li Bai 李白 (701 – 762), the artist wrote two huge characters *shan* 山 “mountain” and *cui* 摧 “destruction, overturning” in order to create a visual metaphor: the character *shan* 山 “mountain” is overturned by the force of the other main character *cui* 摧 “destruction” to symbolize the emergence of a new era for calligraphy (Barrass 2022: 184). The two characters are part of two lines of a poem by Li Bai entitled “The Hard Road to Sichuan” (*Shudao nan* 蜀道难)<sup>8</sup>, which Gu Gan wrote very freely around the huge character *shan* 山 “mountain.” The two lines are:

*Di beng shan cui zhuangshi si,*  
地崩山摧壯士死 [地崩山摧壯士死],  
*ranhou tian ti shi zhanxiang gou lian.*  
然後天梯石棧相鉤連 [然後天梯石棧相鉤連]。

The ground collapsed and the mountain crumbled - warrior heroes died,  
and only then this road in the sky was linked with a plank road.

<sup>8</sup> To read the whole poem in Chinese, see: [https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv\\_d59ec5d6c91c.aspx](https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv_d59ec5d6c91c.aspx) (22.03.2024).

Gu Gan's huge characters reinforce the message of the two lines by Li Bai that from great upheaval new and good things would emerge (Barrass 2002: 55). For Gu Gan, calligraphy is symbolically rejecting old ideas to give birth to new ones. However, according to Chinese classical aesthetics principles, the use of Li Bai's poem (*shi* 诗) written in calligraphic style (*shu* 书) and the manipulation of the two characters to create a visual representation (*hua* 画) also suggest the reference to the Chinese indissoluble artistic triad of "poetry, calligraphy and painting" (*shi shu hua* 诗书画).<sup>9</sup>

Another important example in that sense is the work by Su Yuanzhang entitled "Li Bai's poem" (Fig. 2).

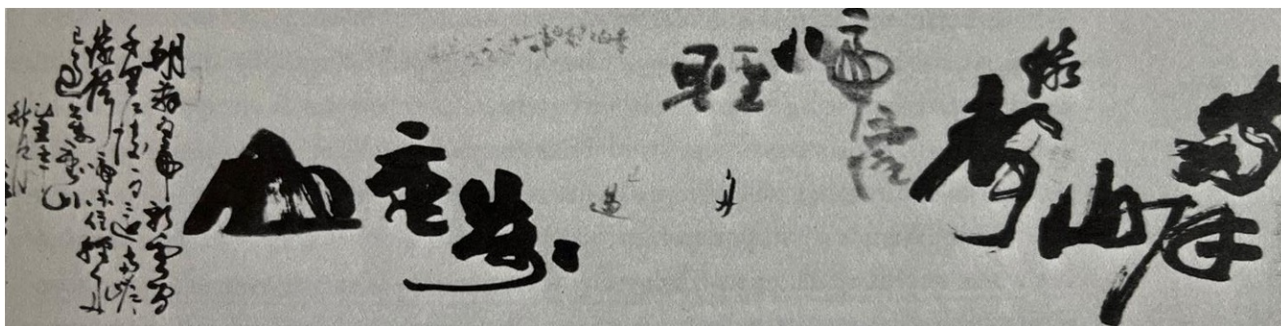


Figure 2. Su Yuanzhang, *Li Bai shi* 李白诗 ("Li Bai's Poem"), 1985, ink on paper.

In this work, the artist uses calligraphic forms and characters disposition to mimic the forms of the landscape painting described in the last two lines of a poem by Li Bai entitled *Zaofa baidi cheng* 早发白帝成 ("Through the Yangtze Gorge"):<sup>10</sup>

*Liang'an yuansheng ti buzhu*  
两岸猿声啼不住 [两岸猿声啼不住],  
*qingzhou yiguo wanchongshan*  
轻舟已过万重山 [轻舟已过万重山]。  
While monkeys vainly hail me from both banks,

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<sup>9</sup> From the eighth century onward, in China these three art forms have been known as the "three perfections" (*san jue* 三绝), and they have been intimately connected in the minds of the 'Chinese literati' (*wen ren* 文人), representing the basis of traditional Chinese culture (Sullivan 1974).

<sup>10</sup> To read the whole poem in Chinese, see: [https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv\\_0f81015a040c.aspx](https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv_0f81015a040c.aspx) (22.03.2024). In Zhang 1998, also the title of Su Yuanzhang's work is "Through the Yangtze Gorge."

My boat has already sped ten thousand mountains away. (Zhang 1998, 15)<sup>11</sup>

The first eight characters for the river banks, the monkeys and their calling are aligned on the right to suggest the presence of a bank of the river further and further away in the background; the three characters “ten thousand mountains” (*wan chong shan* 萬重山) stand firm and upright in the foreground, as if on the near bank; and the other three characters *zhou yi guo* 舟已過 (“my boat has already sped”) are written much smaller and placed between the two river banks like boats flowing quickly on the Yangtze River. “Thus, the image, essentially pictorial in structure, is organically united with that of the poem” (Zhang 1998: 15).

The “pictorial” approach to calligraphy is an important element in these first experimentations (Liu 1999). This means not only a pictorial use of the space, as we have seen in the last two examples, but also the use of pictorial techniques, in particular the insertion of colors (but also the use of flecked ink to obtain stratified effects), and a “pictographic” approach to calligraphy, which means the rework of characters based on their pictographic forms.

For example, in the work by Gu Gan entitled “Deer crying” *Luming* 鹿鸣 (1990, Fig. 3), the artist wrote several times the two characters of the title *lu* 鹿 “deer” and *ming* 鸣 “cry,” using their pictographic forms and adding colors to the pictures in order to recreate the din of a herd of wailing deer.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Translation by Zhang Yiguo and Harry Miller.

<sup>12</sup> The style is reminiscent of Joan Miró, and in fact Gu Gan was deeply influenced by this artist together with Kandinsky and Klee (Barrass 2002: 186). The increasingly thinner brush strokes used by Gu Gan, the use of a line that seeks to hoard and manifest the beauty of form in all its splendor, the adoption of a “childish” language, the isolation of single element/character repeated and arranged in deliberate composition are all references to these Western avant-gardists. The contact and the assimilation of Western avant-garde, in particular of abstract art, together with contemporary Japanese calligraphy (see above), has been one of the main factors of the development of Chinese contemporary calligraphy (Liu 2010: 26-32; Wang 2005: 6; Yang 2004: 227; Qu 2008: 108).



Figure 3. Gu Gan, *Luming* 鹿鸣 (“Deer crying”), 1990, ink and color on paper, 93 x 98 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

From the beginning, the emergence of these innovations/experimentations (manipulation of characters, space decomposition, and “pictorial” approach to calligraphy) is strictly linked to the emergence of the so called “modernist movement” (*xiandai pai* 现代派) (Barrass 2002: 162-193), founded during the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy” and still very active. Even if modernist calligraphers break with the strict rules of Chinese classical aesthetic, focusing on stylistic exploration, they never completely reject the use of the “Four treasures of the study” (*wenfangsibao* 文房四宝: paper, writing brush, ink stick, and ink stone) and remain deeply rooted in the signified system of Chinese writing. Among them, we can recognize 3 different orientations (although the artists often participate in all three):

1. focus on the pictorial elaboration of the pictographic forms of the characters: through the creative deformation of the characters the artists try to suggest and evoke their meanings; the precursors of this orientation are the calligraphy masters Zhang Zhengyu 张正宇 (1904-1976) and Li Luogong, who experimented a lot with seal scripts; one of the leading figures is Huang Miaozi; important exponents are Ma Chengxiang, Dai Shanqing, Wang Xuezhong, Xie Yun 谢云 (1929-2021), Deng Yuanchang 邓元昌 (b. 1939), Wang Naizhuang 王乃壮 (b. 1929) and Peng Shiqiang 彭世强 (b. 1944), who took part in the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy,” as well as artists such as Huang Yao 黄尧 (1917-1987),<sup>13</sup> Wang Yong 王镛 (b. 1948), and Wang Tianmin 王天民 (b. 1944);

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<sup>13</sup> For more details on this artist, see the official site of the “Huang Yao Foundation”: [www.huangyao.org/](http://www.huangyao.org/) (22.03.2024).



2. tension towards a real fusion of painting and calligraphy, carried out through the insertion of figurative elements within unconventional calligraphies (i.e. in Guo Zixu 郭子绪 1940-2018), using colors (i.e. in Gu Gan) and/or painting arrangements and ink techniques (i.e. in Wang Xuezhong, Huang Yao, Wen Bei 文备 b. 1953, etc.); for this nucleus, we can speak of a real “pictorial calligraphy;” the leading figure of this orientation is Gu Gan;
3. focus on a new spatial arrangement of the elements that compose the structure of the calligraphy; the leading figures of this orientation are Wang Dongling 王冬龄 (b. 1945) and Bai Di 白砥 (b. 1965); other important exponents are Tong Yang-tze 董阳孜 (b. 1942), Zhu Naizheng 朱乃正 (1935-2013), Xing Shizhen 邢士珍 (1936-2019), Ma Xiao 马啸 (b. 1962), Zhang Aiguo 张爱国 (b. 1967), Liu Canming 刘灿铭 (b. 1963), Yan Binghui 阎秉会 (b. 1956), Lin Xincheng 林信成 (b. 1952), Wang Gongyi 王公懿 (b. 1946), etc.

## 2.2. Toward the “abstract” line

Most of the artists of the last orientation also create artworks where calligraphic lines are no longer linked to the semantic signs of the Chinese writing: they don't write Chinese characters and/or they don't have in mind Chinese characters so their works can be defined in some way “abstract” (Fig. 4).<sup>14</sup> Instead of being simultaneously a “verbal art” and an “abstract art” (Zhang 1998, 24), the “art of writing characters” (*xiezi yishu* 写字艺术) and the “art of writing lines” (*xiantiao yishu* 线条艺术) (Liu 2010: 28), like traditional calligraphy, in their works calligraphy becomes simply an “abstract art of writing lines” (Iezzi 2013a: 168-169).

Besides them, there are also other artists, who are not “modernist” calligraphers, for example Pu Lieping 濮列平 (b. 1959), Wei Ligang 魏立刚 (b. 1964, fig. 4), Shao Yan 邵岩 (b. 1960), Luo Qi 洛齐 (b. 1960), Fung Ming-chip 冯明秋 (b. 1951), Qiu Zhenzhong 邱振中 (b. 1947) and Chen Guangwu 陈光武 (b. 1967), who greatly deform Chinese characters until they are (nearly) unrecognizable so that their works seem abstract, even if their starting point is, however, Chinese writing (Iezzi 2013b: 54-75).

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<sup>14</sup> For an explanation of the concept of “abstract” in Chinese art and the difference with Euro-American conception, see Iezzi (2013b).

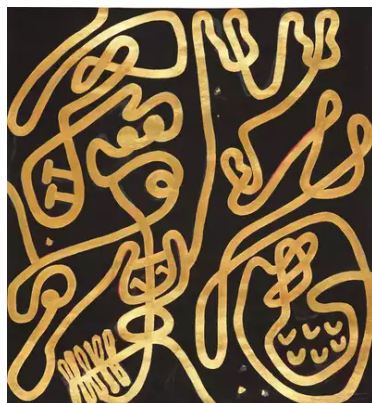


Figure 4. Wei Ligang, *Zhuang zhou meng die* 庄周梦蝶 (“Zhuang Zhou Dreaming a Butterfly”), 2014, ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 96 × 88.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

There are finally other artists, such as Qin Feng 秦风 (b. 1961) and Zhang Dawo 张大我 (1943-2023), who use abstract calligraphic lines as their stylistic signature (*ibid.*, 76-84). The works by Zhang Dawo have gradually lost their connection with Chinese writing and are now entirely inspired by nature (Fig. 5; Xia 2015), while Qin Feng’s art can be defined as “calligraphic abstract expressionism” because he uses calligraphic lines (not words) to give vent to the turmoil of his soul (Malhotra 2003).



Figure 5. Zhang Dawo, “The Star of the City, a Rock and Roll Singer,” 2011, ink on paper, 162 x 94cm. Courtesy of the artist.

### 2.3. New supports/materials and tools

From the end of the 80s, Chinese calligraphers also started to experiment with the use of new supports and materials to replace the traditional ink on *xuan* paper.<sup>15</sup> One of the most notable experimenters in this regard is Wang Dongling. He started with newspaper journals at the end of the eighties (Fig. 6), creating stratified collages, and then he continued with magazine sheets, photographs, acrylic sheets, propylene panels (Fig. 7), polyester/polypropylene films, glass panels, gelatin silver prints, bamboo sticks (Fig. 9), silk robes and even iPad digital support (Fig. 8). Regarding materials, he frequently uses acrylics instead of ink (a common practice among modern calligraphers), and in his latest work, he replaces the brush with an ipencil as calligraphic tool.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 6. Wang Dongling, *Wu 舞* (“Dancing”), 1989, ink and color on newspaper, 55,6 x 54,3 cm. (Fig. 6-9: courtesy of the artist).

Figure 7. Wang Dongling, *Su Shi “Chibi huai gu” 苏轼《赤壁怀古》* (“Meditations on the Ancient Battleground of Chibi by Su Shi”), 2017, acrylics on propylene panel, 220 x 120 cm.

Figure 8. Wang Dongling, *Zhujing 竹径* (“The Bamboo Path”), 2017, ink on bamboo sticks, installation, OCAT, Shenzhen.

Figure 9. Wang Dongling, *Rang shijie chongman ai 让世界充满爱* (“Filling the World with Love”), 2021, iPad work, 2388px×1668px.

<sup>15</sup> For more information about the use of unconventional materials by Chinese experimental artists from the 1980s, see Cacchione and Wu (2019), Cacchione and Lin (2021). The authors of these books coined the term “Material Art” to describe works that place “matter” itself as the primary vehicle of investigation and expression, offering the first serious exploration of ground-breaking material explorations in Chinese contemporary art.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the art of Wang Dongling, see among the others Wang (2007), Xu (2011), Hearn (2013: 139-145), and Gao (2021).

Like Wang Dongling, several artists use new tools to reshape calligraphy, for example, Pu Lieping 濮列平 (b.1959) that recently wrote a poem by Liu Ji using a corn broom (Fig. 10), or Shao Yan who usually uses a syringe with a small ink tank, inventing a new technique called “ink shooting” *shemo* 射墨,<sup>17</sup> Chen Weinong 陈伟农 (b. 1962) that in 2021 used a vileda mop, Wang Tiande 王天德 (b. 1960) that usually burns the characters with cigarettes or incense sticks on his multilayered paintings, Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b. 1969) that in his “Lightwriting Series” (*Guangxie shufa*, 光写书法, 2005-2010) uses a torch to write in the dark air or again Wang Dongling who in 2021 used for the first time an augmented reality headset with related touch controllers to create a 3D virtual calligraphy (Fig. 11).

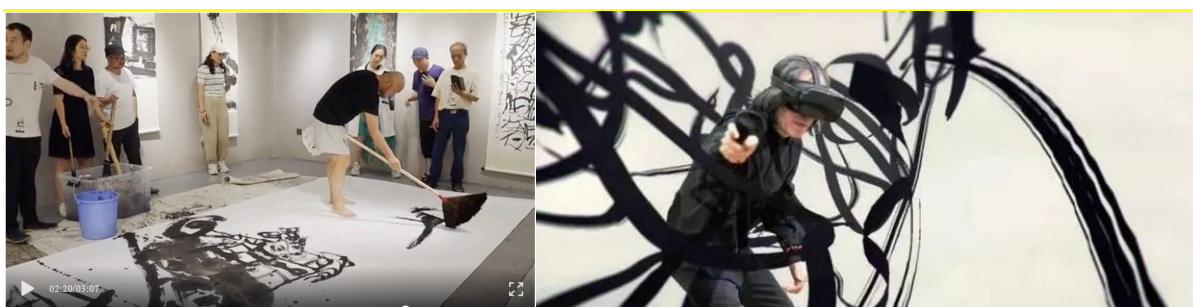


Figure 10. Pu Lieping, *Wu yue shijiu ri dayu* 五月十九日大雨 (“Heavy Rain on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> lunar month”), 07.07.2021, performance with corn broom, brush, ink and color on paper, Huzhou (Zhejiang). Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 11. Wang Dongling, *Xiaoyao you - VR shuxie* 《逍遥游》——VR 书写 (“Enjoyment in untroubled ease”), calligraphy with augmented reality headset, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Other important artists who experimented with new supports and materials are also Luo Qi that sometimes uses canvas, plastic sheets, dresses, and even human faces and bodies to write his calligraphies or creates calligraphic collages and assemblages;<sup>18</sup> Gu Gan who sometimes uses canvas, wood, human bodies, and dresses as calligraphic supports; Qin Feng who experiments with cardboard cutouts; Chen Guangwu who in 2008-2009 wrote the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” on 2700 wooden blocks; Gu Wenda 谷文达 (b. 1955) who used human hair in his “United Nations” (*Lianhe guo* 联合国, 1993-2004), tea paper in his “Tea Alchemy” (2002) and neon in his “Neon calligraphies” (*Nihongdeng shufa*

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<sup>17</sup> For more details on the artist and his “ink shooting,” see Ma (2013).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of the art of Luo Qi, see Iezzi (2019a).

xilie 霓虹灯书法系列, 2004-2007, Fig. 12)<sup>19</sup>; Cai Guo-Qiang 蔡国强 (b. 1957) who in some of his works reproduces the brushstroke using gunpowder; and Feng Mengbo 冯梦波 (b. 1966) who always uses digital supports, for example adapting Chinese calligraphy strokes to a video-game programming language in his “Not too late” (*Bu tai wan* 不太晚, 2010, Fig. 13).



Figure 12. Gu Wenda, “Cultural Transference – Sotheby’s (*Su si bi si* 素思碧寺), A Neon Calligraphy Series,” 2006, mixed media, installation, neon lights on a plexiglas panel, 500 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 13. Feng Mengbo 冯梦波 “Not too late” (*Bu tai wan* 不太晚), 2010, video frame. Courtesy of the artist.

#### 2.4. Deconstruction of Chinese writing and new “conceptual” languages

It has been shown throughout history that the artistic value of calligraphy can sometimes outweigh the content, as seen in the cursive style or some eccentric masterpieces (Hsiung 1984, Schlombs 1998). When the artistic value of writing outweighs the literary content, calligraphy can be said to emphasise the transformation of the brushstroke from a signifier of literary meaning to a signifier of visual meaning. Throughout history, literary meaning and visual meaning have been inseparable but now the negotiating process actively challenges the very notion of literary meaning. As art historian Wu Hung rightly points out, “all traditional calligraphers conducted this transformation in one way or another, but none of them tried to completely divorce form from content. A radical departure from this ancient tradition only occurred in contemporary Chinese art” (Wu 1999: 38). Many contemporary artists began creating pseudo-characters and fake texts during the early and mid-1980s, such as Gu Wenda, Wu

<sup>19</sup> Other artists who uses neon characters are Shi Yong 施勇 (b. 1963) in the work entitled “Three Hundred Characters” (*Sanbai ge zi* 三百个字) exhibited for the first time at the Liverpool Biennial 2018 (<https://artlyst.com/features/liverpool-biennial-2018-here-are-twelve-reasons-to-visit-this-event/>, 22.03.2024), and Jessie Yingying Gong 龚颖颖 (b. 1990) in her series entitled “New Semiotics” (2017-ongoing) (<https://jessieyingyinggong.com/new-semiotics/>, 22.03.2024).

Shanzhuan 吴山专 (b. 1960), Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955), and others, who not only consciously separated content and form but attempted to eliminate the content, leaving form as the sole signifier of meaning. Gu Wenda (Gao M. 2006: 127-135) and Xu Bing (Fraser and Li 2020), deeply attached to traditional aesthetics, but sceptical of any doctrine or content, were drawn to an eccentric form of anti-writing. They used ancient traditions to express themselves effectively by subverting ordinary writing codes, inverting graphs, and fabricating fake characters. Gu Wenda with his *Pseudo-Characters Series* (*Xugou wenzi xilie* 虚构文字系列, 1984-1986, Fig. 14) was the first contemporary Chinese artist to seriously create and exhibit pseudo-calligraphy. For Gu, the unreadable texts are used to evoke the limitations of human knowledge (Leung, Kaplan, Gu *et al.* 1999: 87-99), however the malformed, crossed, or miswritten writing signs signify the futility of human pursuit and the meaninglessness of the written code.



Figure 14. Gu Wenda, “The Mythos of Lost Dynasties - Form C: Pseudo-Seal Scripture in Calligraphic Copybook #c-1” (det.), one of the 50 woks that constitute the series, 1984-86, ink on xuan paper, 96.52 x 66.04 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In 1986, Wu Shanzhuan created the “Red Humor Series” (*Hongse youmo* 红色幽默), which mixed writings of the Cultural Revolution with advertising, everyday language, classical Chinese poetry, and the title of Leonardo’s “The Last Supper.” The writings were arranged around a large text on the floor that reads *wushuo badao* 无说八道, which translates to “don’t say nonsense.” Wu Shanzhuan aims not to represent, but to deconstruct, because he wants to give a critical perception of the surrounding reality.

In 1987 Xu Bing began a huge installation entitled “The Book from the Sky” (*Tianshu* 天书, Fig. 15), in the style of fine editions from the Song and Ming dynasties, but filled with meaningless glyphs

designed to resemble more than 4000 thousand traditional Chinese characters. It is a tragic celebration of universal absurdity and a powerful denial of Chinese history, culture, literature, and language.

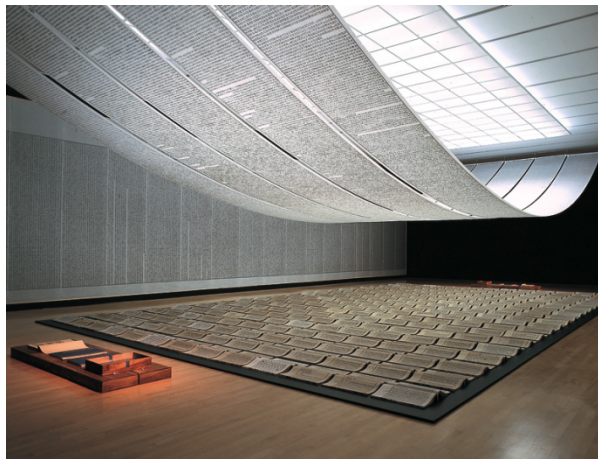


Figure 15. Xu Bing, “Book from the Sky” (*Tian shu* 天书), 1987-91 (installed at the North Dakota Museum of Art, 1992), installation with hand-printed books, dimensions variable, collection of the artist. © Xu Bing Studio.

After the 1989 events in Tian An Men Square, Chinese artists used the calligraphic sign as a means of expressing their pain; between 1990-95 Qiu Zhijie performed “Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface a thousand times” (*Chongfu shuxie yi qian bian ‘Lantingxu’* 重复书写一千遍兰亭序, 1990-1995). Writing and repeating Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303-361)’s Preface for the purpose of perfecting the art of inscribing, the black ink begins to merge, and at the same time, the brush marks mix in a strange entanglement first making the characters anti-writing before they are completely erased. Every day since 1995, in his ongoing conceptual performance “Writing Diary With Water” (*Shui xie riji* 水写日记), Song Dong 宋冬 (b. 1966) has used water to write Chinese characters with his finger or brush on the ground, on ice, on the walls, and then on a rock. However, the ink was water, and after the performance, the text vanished instantly (Lin 2023). The transparent, formless, and ephemeral properties of water offer possibilities for artistic reflections on presence, absence, action, trace, and transience. One of China’s best-known performance and Conceptual artists, Zhang Huan 张洵 (b. 1965), in his project “Family Tree” (*Jiapu* 家谱, 2001, Fig. 16), mapped words, names, and stories from his cultural heritage onto his face (Hearn 2013: 66-70). Nine photographs document the gradual obscuring of Zhang’s face with inked characters until it is completely black. Many Chinese characters have roots in pictographs, but Zhang Huan’s work also references the ancient Chinese art of physiognomy, which predicts the future based on facial features. Rather than elucidate Zhang’s character and destiny, these traditional

fortune-telling devices ultimately veil his identity under a dense layer of culturally conditioned references.



Figure 16. Zhang Huan, “Family Tree” (*Jiapu* 家谱), 2001, chromogenic prints of the artist's performance, 53.3 x 41.9 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Courtesy of the artist.

Every artist of anti-writing created a mystical atmosphere, commonly compared with Buddhism and Taoism traditions, and their particularly strange and eccentric version of Chinese calligraphy. Taoists and Buddhists were very sceptical about the way conceptual ideas were transmitted by concrete language. Instead of the normal way of transmitting ideas, they used paradoxical dialogues (*Zhuangzi* 莊子 and some Chan Buddhist *gong'an* 公案)<sup>20</sup> or paintings as a means of documentation, infused with ritual and worship. Chinese contemporary artists usually found the most appropriate material for myth-making in ancient seal-script or ancient calligraphic styles, types of archaic writing that are so old and difficult to read that they have become a mystery in themselves.

Although a variety of meanings and manifestations can be attributed to anti-writing, Chinese contemporary artists rejected legible characters in order to transform Chinese contradictions. The disconnection between Chinese characters' meanings and their signs reflects the identity crisis currently underway. The result is the cancellation of the written sign and the beginning of a new level of meaning where contemporary artists can begin.

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<sup>20</sup> For an explanation of Chinese paradoxical dialogues, see Wang (2003).



Using human hair and cryptic calligraphy, Gu Wenda began his global “United Nations Project” (*Lianheguo xiangmu* 联合国项目) in 1993. Through this project, he conveyed the meaning of “transculturalism” (Bessire 2003: 12). The installation symbolizes the diversity of races coming together and merging into one “brave new racial identity”<sup>21</sup> made of human hair from people of different races.

Starting in 1994, Xu Bing developed what he called “New English Calligraphy/Square Word Calligraphy” (*Yingwen fangkuaizi shufa* 英文方块字书法, Fig. 17), a synthesis of Chinese and Western writing methods. The calligraphic system designed by Xu Bing adapts the English alphabet to the calligraphic forms of Chinese writing. In order to bridge the two cultures, he deconstructed but then re-configured English words into forms that mimic the square structure of Chinese characters.

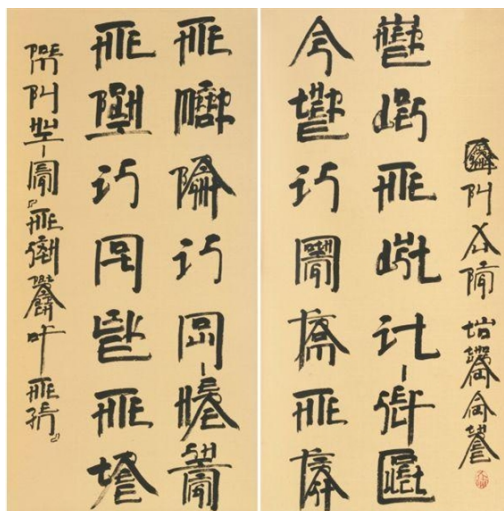


Figure 17. Xu Bing, "Square Word Calligraphy: Longfellow Quote", 2016, ink on xuan paper, 177x192cm.

© Xu Bing Studio.

Pu Lieping theorized in 2002 the *Hanzi yishu* 汉字艺术 (“Art of Chinese Characters;” Pu 2007). It involves combining meanings, sounds, forms, or even single (or part of) Chinese characters to create works that apply to any artistic medium (painting, sculpture, installation, architecture, design, theatre, dance, etc.).

Since 2003, Xu Bing has been working on his “Book from the Ground” (*Dishu* 地书). This book is unique in its use of symbols, derived from international signs combined with emoticons from electronic media. Xu Bing elaborates on a unique code and chooses a distinct style. Using contemporary

<sup>21</sup> See “Artist bio - Wenda Gu’s bio” in WendaGu.com.

pictograms and meta-linguistic characters, he gives new meaning to signs already in use. Pictograms, scripts, and calligraphy are summarized in a single work. It is now possible to understand the arts of the brush beyond national boundaries, regardless of education level (or almost). With the increasing integration of computers and the Internet into daily life, the lexicon of digital symbols has grown as well. The symbolic language of “Book from the Ground” has further evolved, expanded, and complicated. While his “Book from the Sky,” “written” 30 years earlier, is incomprehensible, his “Book from the Ground” is accessible to all. The book expresses Xu Bing's vision of a universal language (Xu 2020).

In 2005 Qiu Zhijie invented the so-called “light-calligraphy-photography” (Gao S. 2007: 11) which updates the traditional calligraphic practice using the torch (like a brush) and colour photography (like ink and paper). Qiu Zhijie, therefore, intends to preserve both the past and the present, with the written character returning to gain meaning.

According to the artists analyzed thus far, characters and calligraphy continue to be the basis for contemporary Chinese artistic exploration. While writing and calligraphy focused on the deconstruction of the writing system and language in the 1980s and 1990s, they have also emerged as central subjects of research in a largely uncharted area of knowledge. “New” characters transcend all national and cultural boundaries and are no longer malformed, crossed, faked, incomprehensible, or poorly written. A “new language” of characters and their calligraphic versions is worldly understood by everyone, through any artistic medium.

### 3. New forms of calligraphy in performing arts: performance art, contemporary dance, and music

The link between performing arts and calligraphy has always been crucial for calligraphic aesthetics. As a lyrical experience, during the phase of execution calligraphy concentrates on the dynamics of momentum and harmony with the universal rhythmic flowing (Ledderose 1986, Kao 1991: 74-83), as it happens in all the performing arts, and especially in performance art, dance, and music. Similarities between calligraphy and performance art are:

1. the focus on the artist's action;
2. the importance of interaction with the public audience;
3. the “processual” and “spontaneist” manner;
4. the concept of “experience”;
5. the close relationship with other art forms (poetry, painting, dance, and music) (Bonito Oliva 2007, Zhang 2006).

Because of all these similarities, lots of contemporary artists are trying to interconnect these two forms of art. They can be divided into two categories:

1. contemporary performers who use calligraphy as a source of inspiration for their happenings/performances (i.e. Zhang Huan, in his *Family Tree* 2001, Fig. 16, or Song Dong and Wu Wei 吴味, b. 1963, in many of their series);<sup>22</sup>
2. contemporary calligraphers who try to transform calligraphic modes into a performative action:
  - i) some of them, such as Zhang Qiang 张强 (b. 1962), make calligraphic performances their first expressive form (Fig. 18);<sup>23</sup>
  - ii) others, such as Pu Lieping (Fig. 10), Shao Yan and Wang Dongling, only sometimes use these two forms together, especially during the inaugural events of their exhibitions.



Figure 18. Zhang Qiang, “Traceology Report – Model A/C”, 2003, performance, opening ceremony of the exhibition “2003: Art of Ink in Xi’an Committee”, Xi’an, China. Courtesy of the artist.

<sup>22</sup> For Song Dong, these series are: “Writing Diary with Water” *Shuixie riji* 水写日记 (1995 – ongoing), “Stamping the Water” *Yinshui* 印水 (1996), “Recording a Millennium in Water” *Shui xie qian nian* 水写千年 (1999/2000), “Writing Time with Water” *Shui xie shijian yi ge duo xiaoshi* 水写时间一个多小时 (1995 – ongoing), and “Fill in the Sea” (2012). For Wu Wei, these series are: *Maobi fumo* 毛笔抚摩 (“Touches of the brush,” 2002-2007), *Maobi buzhen* 毛笔布阵 (“Brush array,” 2002-2003) and *Maobi jiaoyu* 毛笔交遇 (“Encounter with the brush,” 2002-2003). Zhang Huan used calligraphy in another famous performance entitled “1/2” (1998). Also other artists used calligraphy in their performances, such as Gu Wenda in “Speechless #1---2” *Wu yan #1---2* 无言#1---2 (1984-1986), and Qiu Zhijie in “Ten Tang Poems” *Tangshi shi shou* 唐诗十首 (2000-2001).

<sup>23</sup> Zhang Qiang was the first to do it in 1995 when he firstly conceived his “Traceology Report” (1996-2006). “Traceology” is a method he always uses in his calligraphic performances with an active collaboration of a female counterpart. The artworks created during these performances sometimes become monumental site-specific installations of huge panels entirely covered by calligraphic lines. Also today he continues to explore this *modus operandi*.

As Qiu Zhijie points out: “The calligrapher is like a dancer, dancing with the brush while the traces of the ink record his movement.”<sup>24</sup> The connection between calligraphy and dance is very deep and has its roots in the history of the art of calligraphy. Calligraphy is “the dance of the wrist/ink” and its aesthetics is directly linked to the conception of the “physical execution” of harmonic movements (Kao 1991: 74-83). In the contemporary age, and in particular from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when contemporary dance became popular in China, several contemporary dance companies have tried to “translate” this close relationship with evocative choreographies that fuse these two art forms into one. Starting from the idea of “dancing ink” by the Chinese calligrapher Wang Fangyu 王方宇 (1913-1997) (Wang 1984, 1993), the first “calligraphy dance performance” was held in 1983 at the Asia Society Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium in New York. From that moment on, lots of Chinese contemporary dance companies have created ballets inspired to calligraphy. Among them, the most important are: the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (“Cursive: A Trilogy,” 2001-2005, Fig. 19, and “Water Stains on the Wall”, 2010),<sup>25</sup> and the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (“Upon Calligraphy/Beyond Calligraphy,” 2005-ongoing).



*Figure 19.* Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, “Cursive: A Trilogy”, 2005. Choreographer: Lin Hwai-min; dancer: Chou Chang-ning; calligraphy in the background by Tong Yang-tze; photo by Liu Chen-hsiang. Courtesy of the dance company.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Qiu Zhijie by Walter Romeo: see the video “Qiu Zhijie at work”, Youtube, 31.05.2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dtdbt4e68LM> (22.03.2024).

<sup>25</sup> For more details about the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, see its official website: <https://www.cloudgate.org.tw/en/cg> (22.03.2024).

Chinese calligraphy is “a musical art” (Billeter 1990: 89). In contemporary age, the strict correlation between music and calligraphic principles (Billeter 1990: 89-107) has influenced the artistic activities of both calligraphers and musicians in three different ways:

1. when they work together in “musicalligraphy performances” (i.e. during the opening ceremony of the exhibition “Luo Qi: Writing Music” held in Bologna in 2019 when the calligrapher Luo Qi wrote a 20 meters long calligraphy inspired by the notes of a musical quartet by the *Collegium Musicum Almae Matris*, Fig. 20<sup>26</sup>);<sup>27</sup>
2. when musicians inspire the shaping of their music gestures to calligraphic brushes (i.e. in a Chou Wen-chung classical piece entitled “Cursive” inspired by cursive style, 1964);<sup>28</sup>
3. when calligraphers conform their artistic conception to music principles (i.e. in Silvio Ferragina’s *Musicaligraphy Project*, a new system to convert calligraphic strokes into musical notes, 2013-ongoing, Fig. 21).<sup>29</sup>



Figure 20. Luo Qi and the Collegium Musicum Almae Matris, musicalligraphy performance, Exhibition “Luo Qi: Writing Music,” opening ceremony, 25.03.2019, Bologna University Library. Courtesy of the artists.

<sup>26</sup> For more details about this performance and the related exhibition, see Iezzi (2020b).

<sup>27</sup> The first to do that was Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生 (b. 1957) in 1997 with his musicalligraphy performance entitled *Xiao sheng, liu shui, shuxie* 箫声·流水·书写 (Flute Melodies, Flowing Water, Writing Calligraphy) (Zhu 2000, 255). Ceng Laide, Pu Lieping and Silvio Ferragina are also artists often engaged in musicalligraphy performances.

<sup>28</sup> To listen to the song, visit: [https://chouwenchung.org/de/composition/cursive/\(22.03.2024\)](https://chouwenchung.org/de/composition/cursive/(22.03.2024)). In his late compositions (from 1990 to 2003), the Sino-American composer Chou Wen-chung created a system that allowed him to translate his calligraphy into music (Everett 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Other important examples in that sense are the series “The Music Script” (*Yinyue zi* 音乐字) by Fung Ming-Chip (2015) and “The music of Ink – Silent Melodies” (*Moyue: wusheng zhi ge* 墨乐：无声之歌) by Luo Qi (2018). For more details, see respectively Fung (2015) and Iezzi (2020a).

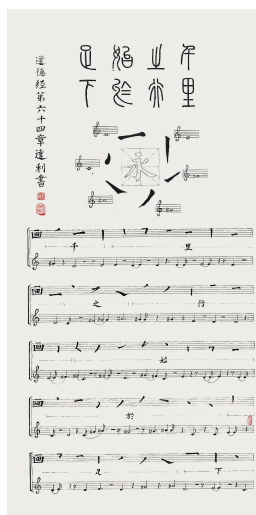


Figure 21. Silvio Ferragina, *Qianli zhi xing kaiyu zu xia* 千里之行始於足下 (A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step), 2013, ink on paper, 70 x 180 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

There are also performances in which calligraphy, music, and dance work together to create a multimodal and extremely captivating experience, like for example in Pu Lieping's performance *Kewang shengming* 渴望生命 ("Desire of Life," 2010) at the Tap Seac Gallery in Macao or in Wang Dongling's performance *Mowuxihu - shufa yu wudao de duihua* 墨舞西湖——书法与舞蹈的对话 ("Ink Dance at the West Lake—A Dialogue between Calligraphy and Dance," 2011) at the Zhejiang Art Museum in Hangzhou.

#### 4. New forms of calligraphy in decorative art (ceramics), applied arts (graphic, industrial and fashion design) and architecture

The use of the Chinese writing in artistic craftsmanship for the upper classes was a constant in the history of China. As to decorative arts, the most representative examples are ceramics. In their "marks" calligraphy was always present. In contemporary ceramics production, calligraphy is still an important decorative element, but it has been reworked, i.e. becoming a cobalt blue "wild style" script on a porcelain plate (2010, Fig. 22), or it has fragmented and parceled out, i.e. in the Li Xiaofeng's "Made in China" dress (2009). Ceramics has also become the support for modern calligraphers, like in the tableware called "Les poèmes du Mandarin" for Hermès by Fung Ming-chip (2009).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For more details, see: [https://fuqiumeng.com/news/40-news-fung-ming-chip-les-poemes/\(22.03.2024\)](https://fuqiumeng.com/news/40-news-fung-ming-chip-les-poemes/(22.03.2024)).



Figure 22. Kwanyin Clan, *Heqi* 和气 (Peace), 2010, porcelain plate painted in cobalt blue with a marker.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Calligraphy applied to graphic design transformed calligraphic strokes into desired design elements and enhanced and improved graphic design to an international level (Guo 2015). The application of calligraphy in graphic design is embodied not only by font design (Liao 2009; Vermeeren 2020: 189-218) but also by logo design, packaging design, poster design, and book design (Guo 2016). The most famous example of the use of calligraphy in graphic design is the logo of the Paralympic Games, designed by Paul Liu, a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, who applied traditional calligraphic art elements and transformed the Chinese character *zhi* 之 (“go”) into a human shape in motion (Fig. 23). Other important applied arts, directly connected to the new capitalist and global society, which emerged in China in the last two decades, are industrial and fashion designs (Tsui 2010). In industrial design, calligraphic lines evolve into decorative elements, for example inspiring the design of elegant and smooth armchairs (see the Minaxdo “Yuanyuan armchair,” Fig. 24).<sup>31</sup> Also in fashion design, calligraphy plays an important role:

1. as a source of inspiration for both Chinese and foreign stylists (i.e. Christian Dior 1951, Coco Chanel 1956, Vivienne Tam 2013, Chloe Sung 2016, and Grace Chen 2021-2022);
2. because of several collaborations between “modern calligraphers” and famous fashion houses/stylists (i.e. King of Koowloon and William Tang Tat Chi in 1997, Luo Qi and EFEN in 2008-

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<sup>31</sup> For more details, visit the official website of Minaxdo: <http://en.minaxdo.com/product/> (22.03.2024). Other important examples are: the “Calligraphy Flatware” designed by Kate Chung (<https://luminaire.com/products/calligraphy-flatware-kate-chung-counterpoint-design-resources>, 22.03.2024), the “LG Chinese calligraphy tablet” by Daniel Yoon, and the “Seiko Clock” by Alan Chan (1998).

2009, Xu Bing and Calvin Klein 2011, and Tong Yang-tze in her multi-year initiative “From Ink to Apparel” 2016-2018);<sup>32</sup>

3. in the use of dresses as a new support for innovative calligraphies (i.e. in some works by Zhang Qiang, Fig. 18, Wang Tiande, Shi Yu 时昱 and Wang Xinyuan 王新元).



Figure 23. Beijing 2008 Paralympics logo by Paul Liu. Courtesy of the International Olympic Committee.

Figure 24. The “Yuanyuan Armchair – Ease” (*Yuantuan yi - yi 缘圆椅——逸*) by Minaxdo, rosewood, 60 x 70 x 80 cm.

Calligraphic lines are a source of inspiration also for lots of contemporary architects. Important examples of calligraphy-inspired architectures are the Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou (2004-2007) by Wang Shu 王澍 (b. 1963), the winner of the 2012 Pritzker Architecture Prize;<sup>33</sup> the ‘Yi garden’ by Zhu Pei 朱锺 (b. 1962) at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Biennale in Venice (2010); the ‘Blossom Gate’ in Xiangyang by the Studio Penda (2012-2013); and the SKY SOHO in Shanghai by Zaha Hadid (2010-2014).

## 5. New forms of calligraphy in graffiti art

Calligraphy in China is everywhere, especially along the streets, for example in the calligraphic “signboards” located on every government, institutional and religious buildings (Yen 2005: 17-25), and

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<sup>32</sup>For more details, see: <https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6> (22.03.2024).

<sup>33</sup>For more details on this opera, see Webb (2015).



in the scrawled advertisements on walls by the migrant workers.<sup>34</sup> During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), there is a peak in the use of “big characters posters” (*dazibao* 大字报) that invaded the streets with their ideological writings (Kraus 1991: 96-108). In the 90s calligraphy started to appear also on public walls as the first form of “graffiti art” (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术) (Wu 2000; Valjakka 2011), becoming popular in all major Chinese cities in the mid-2000s (Hassan and Sanada 2011), especially in Beijing and Shanghai (Valjakka 2016).<sup>35</sup> In this particular art that comes from the USA, the use of writing is fundamental and in China, its development has been extremely peculiar and cultural-oriented. Looking at the artistic production of the main Chinese crews, it is possible to recognize two main trends (Iezzi 2020c):

1. one that encourages a process of “internationalization” of Chinese graffiti, promoting the use of the Latin alphabet, English language, Western figurative elements and engaging frequent collaborations with foreign brands (i.e. ABS crew);
2. one opposed trend that encourages a process of “sinicization” of graffiti art, promoting the use of Chinese characters and calligraphy, in order to create a “Chinese graffiti style” (*Zhongguo tese de tuyayishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术) (i.e. Kwanyin Clan, Fig. 25<sup>36</sup>).

In this last trend, calligraphy is used in two ways:

1. to shape writing pieces in Chinese characters, the so-called “Charactering pieces” (fig. 25 in the center);
2. to write calligraphic inscriptions or tags using a spray can instead of ink brush (fig. 25 top right and bottom left).

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<sup>34</sup> For more details and the significance of these scrawled advertisements, see Parke (2018: 261-284). She defined this phenomenon as a “public calligraphy performance.”

<sup>35</sup> For a detail analysis of the diffusion of graffiti art in particular in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu, see Bisceglia, Merenda and Iezzi (2024).

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed analysis of this work and of the artistic production of the Kwanyin Clan, see Iezzi (2019b).



Figure 25. Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan), *Shirupuo zhu* 势如破竹 (With Irresistible Force), February 4-6, 2008, 6 x 6 m, spray painting on panel, Nike 706 Gallery, 798 Art District, Beijing. Courtesy of the artists. In the center of the work, the artists wrote the four characters “势如破竹” in wildstyle, at the top right a poem entitled “The Red River” (*Man jiang hong* 满江红, 1132) and at the bottom left the name of their crew (*Guanyin* “观音”) and theirs tags (“EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan”). Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to the numerous crews/writers who do that,<sup>37</sup> some Euro-American writers work in China using Chinese writing and reference to calligraphy in their works (i.e. Dezio from France in Shanghai and ZATO in Beijing); they try to interact with the local community assimilating the local language and culture.

## 6. Conclusion

The overview presented in this article demonstrates the capability of Chinese calligraphy to fit into visual art forms and into the movements of performing arts in contemporary times. From abstract

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<sup>37</sup>In addition to the Kwanyin Clan in Beijing, other important crews/writers who use Chinese characters and calligraphy in their works are the Beijing Penzi, EXAS and ZEIT in Beijing, GAS in Chengdu, the OOPS crew in Shanghai, Touchy in Shenzhen, Xeme and Sinic in Hong Kong, Mora in Guangzhou, and Moon in Quanzhou.

calligraphies to graffiti pieces, new forms of calligraphy have emerged. They responded to, subverted, or reinterpreted traditional idioms to define a modern artistic identity that exists comfortably within the global art world while remaining indelibly Chinese. In particular, during the Chinese avantgardes movements of the 1980s to 1990s (known as the New Wave), there was a notable broadening of perspective on contemporary Chinese art. This was achieved through the integration of calligraphy into contemporary experimentation. This integration facilitated a more direct and profound engagement of calligraphy with other forms of painting and performance arts, resulting in stylistic and thematic influences. Consequently, calligraphy evolved into a highly relevant expressive code, widely embraced and utilized by artists. In recent times, artists have endeavored to normalize the use of ink as a means to foster reconciliation between international contemporary art and 'traditional art.' At the same time, being inherently visual, Chinese characters open themselves to all kinds of graphic and artistic manipulation, expanding their use also to decorative and applied arts towards marketing-oriented products and even to graffiti art. All these new forms of calligraphy powerfully resonate with China's rich and enduring cultural tradition. At the same time, they arise from the sweeping social, political, and economic changes that have taken place in China during the last decades. These new forms demonstrate how the art of calligraphy is still very much alive and present in the artistic reflection of Chinese contemporary artists.

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