

Contemporary reinventions of Chinese calligraphy

A semiotic exploration*

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Abstract

Chinese calligraphy can be semiotically approached from its contemporary transformations, in an historical moment of cultural revival and media popularity. After an initial dialogue with recent contributions about the peculiarities of that long lasting tradition, where the sensori-motor dimension of the calligraphic practice will be considered, the contribution will delve into an analytical observation of four contemporary artists, all of them reinventing calligraphy in their own terms. The semiotic analysis will move in between the visible plastic features, the universes of meanings evoked and the way the practice itself is assumed by the artists. Wang Dongling, Xu Bing, Lui Shou Kwan, Wang Tiande will be the authors of a semiotic test. Can we finally map the forms of alteration of the calligraphy? The practice itself is considered as embedding an entire form of life, culturally attached to the values of Daoism or Confucianism and the final proposed mapping is grasping the alterations of that form of life.

Keywords

Chinese calligraphy; Sensorimotricity; Wang Dongling; Xu Bing; Figuration.

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1. Introduction

This study stems from a confrontation between a semiologist and a Chinese designer, a spontaneous informant and a scholar herself of calligraphic practice (cf. Hou 2022). The research is mainly exploratory, with respect to a field as stratified and complex as Chinese calligraphy (Liu 2000). Precisely for this reason, let us clarify from the outset the theoretical stakes of this research, which will find a case study with a relatively circumscribed and defined corpus. The question that started our journey is that of the role of visibility in Chinese calligraphy. Initially, we will enter into dialogue with a number of reference authors, mainly of linguistic and anthropological background, who partially witness the state of the art of reflections on this multifaceted topic. We will then move on to some experiments in contemporary reinvention (forms of re-appropriation and revival) of the art of Chinese writing, taking a close look at four figures from the artistic domain, all of them already widely recognised at home or internationally, for the value of their work related to the transformations of writing. We will analyse some of their works in more detail in order to finally propose a semiotic model capable of reading the ways in which a tradition revived after the end of the Chinese cultural revolution and proposed today as an identifying element of the Chinese cultural ethos is prolonged in contemporary forms of Chinese writing production. From a methodological point of view, we will see three relevant levels of observation involved: the properly expressive devices of writing – the object of possible plastic readings –, the content level, in variable relation to an inheritance that finds in Confucianism or Daoism, among others, two massive universes of signification, and finally, and above all, a writing practice, a specific modality of use of the body in a situation of textual production.

2. A critical multidisciplinary background

The Western gaze has relatively recently thematised the specific diversity of Chinese calligraphy and its ideograms, starting with Fenollosa's (2008) historical contribution, in a text written at the beginning of the 20th century and celebrated today more for its impact on poetic writing than for the correctness of its claims in the field of sinology. Fenollosa's main argument, let us remember, is that Chinese writing has a "natural" connection with experience, less abstract than the Western approach, writing that resonates with the processuality and becoming of the world. This is witnessed, according to him, by the abundance of transitive verbs in the language, in which subject and object positions coexist against a transfer of properties determined by the predicate. Fenollosa defends, from a poetic theory perspective, the analogical remotivation that would find an effective synthesis in the visibility of the character. The commentary on a verse of three ideograms (人, 见, 马 "Man Sees Horse") is revealing:

But Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. In the algebraic figure and in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends

upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method follows natural suggestion. First stands the man on his two legs. Second, his eye moves through space: a bold figure represented by running legs under an eye, a modified picture of an eye, a modified picture of running legs, but unforgettable once you have seen it. Third stands the horse on his four legs. (*ivi*: 45)

If so, the arbitrariness of the sign would be replaced by a primary iconism that would then supports the metaphorical-poetic possibilities of Chinese writing. It was the sinologist Billeter (1989), who freed us from an iconic-visual pre-eminence, while maintaining the centrality of the idea of dynamism. His now classic text is programmatically entitled *The Chinese art of writing*: the refusal of using the term calligraphy is due to the restricted Western meaning of it, reinforced in the etymology:

[L]a calligraphie chinoise n'est ni une écriture appliquée, ni une écriture enjolivée. Elle bannit la stylisation arbitraire des formes et plus encore le rajout décoratif. L'unique préoccupation du calligraphe chinois est de donner vie aux caractères, de les animer sans les forcer en rien. (Billeter 1989: 11)

Character itself, Billeter largely demonstrates, becomes body. A little further on, he introduces one of the dominant motifs of his interpretation: “Tandis que la calligraphie occidentale produit des formes arrêtées, la calligraphie chinoise est par essence un art du mouvement” (*ibidem*). What kind of fluid movement is it then? The author delves into the theme of the construction of corporeity, and thus of identity, in relation to the practice of writing. It is the regulated gestuality of the body that serves as the key to understanding that writing system. The slow initiation into a gestural mnemotechnics does not play on a figurative similarity at all, but on a regeneration of dynamic profiles, temporal flows and, from a semiotic point of view, sensory-motor configurations. Not by hazard “ils ont pris les corps propre pour paradigme de la réalité tout entière” (*ivi*: 247). This phenomenological rooting has recently been revised by Yen (2005), who moves ethnographically over several semantic terrains. For him too “[T]he graphic accomplishment of calligraphy cannot be explained without bringing to the fore the dexterous motorial achievement that is involved” (Yen 2005: 100). Yen demonstrates the moral dimension of the brush technique, related to the rectification of the body, as well as its “bodybuilding” feature, imbued with values like purity and calmness or meditation. The search for unbalanced balancing in the composition is just one of the different contradictions that inhabit the practice of writing (proceeding backwards, attacking the sign in the opposite direction to conceal the attack itself, etc.) as a reflex of a cosmological model imbued with the coexistence of the opposite polarities.

With respect to the possible contrast between drawing and writing, between autography and allography, between self-expression and notational system (cf. Goodman 1968), a reference author, precisely for approaching Chinese calligraphy, is – curiously enough – Tim Ingold (2007). In his text on the history of lines, he dedicates a study to that oriental way of writing, within a chapter in which he precisely proposes to rethink the drawing-writ-

ing relationship as a polarised continuum that does not oppose in absolute terms the two forms of manifestation but poses writing as a sort of borderline case of drawing, deliberately subjugated to a notational and linearised logic. In practising writing, in fact, the moving hand can always reactivate the drawn qualities of writing. Indeed, calligraphic expertise explores the possibilities of a protosemiotics (Fabbri 2013), in search of forms of self-expression hidden in the trace, beyond the notational recognisability of the letter.

In the Chinese case, however, the drawn aspect of writing has always been part of the field of knowledge of the tradition, and the all-Western polarity between notation and drawing is dropped from the outset. Ingold likewise focuses on the centrality of movement and writing dynamics, insisting more on the *choreographic* model of movement. Calligraphy is a centripetal dance (vs. the centrifugal dance of the body, coupled with music, that occupies the space) which mediates the relationship between the hand, the body and the paper.

François Jullien is a sinologist, carefully dedicated to restoring the Western philosophical gap with the Chinese tradition, who nevertheless has never launched into a monograph on calligraphy,¹ after working on painting (Jullien 2003). However, strong similarities emerge between the role of the brush in painting and in writing, as he is ready to recognize. In that direction, they share: i) a processual conception of form, already at the linguistic level (*ivi*: 197); ii) an importance of gestural expressiveness linked to the “breath” and to an energy profile, according to which “the manipulation of the brush belongs to the same art as the manipulation of ax or knife” (*ivi*: 200); iii) the idea that “painting stems more from a kinetic-energetic apprehension than from an aesthetic perception” (*ivi*: 203); iv) the assimilation between painting and writing, evidenced in the language, with stroke techniques borrowed from the art of writing, such as the single stroke of the brush to concatenate the figurations “without interrupting the rhythmic momentum” (*ivi*: 212).

From a more strictly semiotic point of view, it is well known how Fontanille’s semiotics of the body resumed the embodied dimension of signification into two large, complementary figures: on the one hand the *body-envelope*, and on the other the *body-movement* profile, linked to sensori-motricity. The sensori-motricity, in addition to playing an anthropological role as mediator with respect to semantic assimilations of mythological discourse, had already been brought into the focus of attention of a semiotics of the visible in the analysis of decorations in a corpus of Berber vases (Fontanille 1998), a possible forerunner of local writing systems. In that case, Fontanille, rereading Leroi-Gourhan (1964), posited a rhythmic principle as superordinating, a rhythm of the inscribing hand with respect to the variable morphologies of the support. This rhythmic dimension, in spite of its abstract appearance from a purely visual point of view, is reinterpreted as a sensorimotor trace in an extended framework of practices. The choreutic potential of the image is fully affirmed in *Figure del corpo* (2004), which thus represents a decisive junction to also look at Chinese calligraphy from this angle. In the developments of a

¹ Maybe this is also motivated by the open intellectual conflict with Billeter, exploded after Billeter (2006).

semiotics of the imprint, Fontanille opposes the logic of *burying-unburying* sensory-motor forms to the forms of *cryptions* and *decryptions* typically attributed to writing as happening on a surface of inscription. Yen (2005) shows how learned ideograms resurge from the flesh after having been “buried” through the gestural mnemotechnics. Semiotically, it is about a move from a pure visual semiotics, solely focused on reception and on the dominant perceptual channel of the viewer, to a more organic semiotics of the visible, where the point of view embraces the one related to production.

After sharing these introductory notes about the Chinese art of writing as practice, with a necessary sensori-motor component, we now begin our exploration of four contemporary authors capable of reinventing its mode of presence and as well as its forms of appearance.

3. Wang Dongling and the calligraphic performance

3.1. Critical background

Wang Dongling (b. 1945) is perhaps among the most canonised authors in the recent history of calligraphy in China, covering the prestigious role of Director of the Chinese Academy of Modern Art, Calligraphy Center. Wang, originally from a small village, has traversed those crucial phases of recent Chinese history that revolve around the Cultural Revolution, succeeding not only in safeguarding calligraphic practice from the iconoclastic impetus of the revolution, but also in bringing calligraphy itself back to new heights, promoting an eclectic approach to bring East and West together under new perspectives². Prolific in his productions, Dongling has featured in international exhibitions for the past two decades and was further worldwide celebrated in recent years when Apple asked him to collaborate as a performer for the exterior façade of the brand’s new store in West Lake. Wang Dongling is also the author of writings on the meaning of traditional Chinese calligraphy. Let us take a closer look at the main traits attributed to Dongling by critics.

– His vast production moves between three main directions with respect to calligraphic legibility: more traditional works of script execution, in which a clear scriptural notationality is preserved; works in which the recognisability of the characters is called into question by processes of deformation that undermine legibility itself; forms of expression in which the calligraphic technique generates true pictorial works, more abstract, displayed as paintings.- He is the author who is credited with the most convincing exploration of a sixth mode of calligraphy, called *luanshu* (chaos script), in which legibility is no longer the primary value, as opposed to calligraphic gestures, which remain. For example:

[...] usually there are no decipherable Chinese characters in his works, which have become closer to abstract painting than to calligraphy. Wang Dongling has been enormously influential on the whole development of contemporary calligraphy and ink painting (Kuo 2010: 111).

² For a wider presentation of his long artistic career, cf. Barras (2002).

- It was Wang who explored calligraphy practice on different scales, especially for very large dimensions (the Apple store façade is a case in point). He fully embraced the idea of calligraphy as performance, even using vertical transparent surfaces to make his inscriptive activity filmable, in continuity with what Picasso, his artistic hero, had shown. Wang varied the materials, the media (from magazine collage to Plexiglas) and the drawing tools, namely the paintbrush.
- His institutional role has allowed him to travel to the West and to engage with authors in an indirect or direct manner, inviting us to explore the tangencies between calligraphic art and the tensions of contemporary art on a more cosmopolitan level. Traces of this constant confrontation have flowed into ambitious projects of dialogue between artists, whether American (Brice Marden³) or German (Martin Wehmer⁴). Critics are not indifferent to the even epistemological challenges of such dialogues, interpreting Wang’s eclecticism as an attempt to absorb any form of novelty from the West in order to root it in the millennial history of calligraphy (cf. Xiang and Shiau Gee 2020).
- In terms of content, Dongling embraces a horizon of values that is an integral part of the tradition of Chinese thought, along certain crucial lines of Daoism and Confucianism. On the other hand, the Tang dynasty (618-906 B.C.) offers a poetic-literary quality that lends itself to numerous calligraphic reinterpretations.

3.2. The chaotic script

In his interviews, Wang often repeats that chaotic, illegible writing coexists with the integrity of traditional writing techniques (a reflection, it seems, of a Shaolin fighting monk ethos). What is most challenged, compared to tradition, is the isolation of the single ideogram: Wang superimposes strokes, at each restart of the gesture, creating an effect of saturation and rarefaction, of thickening and emptying. The resumption and control of technique invite one to overlap the performance character of the writing with jazz improvisation (cf. Duranti and Kenny 2004). The iconising or figurative pressure of the gesture, which can easily fall back on formulations or options already known and available, empowered by the praxis, pushes instead to seek that limit towards a point beyond, an extreme, a radical no longer ascribable to the already known and therefore automatically “fresh”, unprecedented. The discipline of the body therefore coexists with a push towards areas where it is possible to escape, plastic loopholes to the figurative pressure of ideograms. The elementary nature of the formants visible in his works, sinuous intersecting lines, find their own viability beyond the beaten track, each time challenging their own consistency and hold. In performing the interpretation of poems that are part of the canon, Wang operates the brush with one hand while holding a sheet of paper with the text of the poem or poem in the other, which suggests the calligraphic reinterpretation precisely as an improvised performance. The

³ Cf. Tancock (2018).

⁴ Cf. Hertel (2019).

ethics of writing requires prior preparation, a placing oneself in the right disposition: organising the inscription surfaces, arranging the basin with the ink, preparing the brush, emptying the space around it. Performance is a ritual renewed each time, a way of inhabiting the body in a space of elementary tensions. Chaotic writing is thus to be understood as an active resistance to the pressure of the already known, in order to re-establish a practicability here and now of writing itself, outside the stringent meshes of tradition.

3.3. An analytical foray

Take his exhibition *Poetry & Painting*, whose catalogue has been published (2018). The works on display are divided into two large blocks: the interpretation of poems from the tradition, executed through his chaotic calligraphy, and individual autonomous paintings, in which the titling evokes Daoist references in various ways. Now, it is precisely the titles that indicate, in this second set, at least three distinct semantic tracks: i) the search for an expression of the moment, more impressionistic or phenomenological; ii) the celebration of a full immanence broaden towards seasonal references, hence detached from a situational rendering, the latter being usually connected to the rendering of an ongoing perception. A third set of titles takes us into more conceptual and abstract terrains, such as the Dao itself or “balance” or “happiness”, and establishes a coherent background from an ideological point of view. This breadth of content, from the abstract to the sensorial, from the situational to the seasonal, coexists with an apparent extreme economy of expressions, lines of ink on paper (strictly Xuan, the most prized paper in China for its ink-absorbing quality), with more or less standard formats (for example, the 180 x 96 cm vertical format is repeated for the more conceptual works). Among the works in the exhibition, we find *Perfume of a Flower*, in which the title already seems to indicate a planned synesthesia of the pictorial-calligraphic practice.

The semiotic stakes are known: what figurative properties of the process of scenting are here brought into shape through the order of the visible (cf. Fontanille 1999 and Basso Fossali 2008, ch. 9)? The brush stroke takes the form of multiple, sometimes overlapping swirls that are particularly thickened in the topologically central area of the image. The black colour is arranged in a continuous tracing, with zones in which two types of ink transformations occur. In one direction, it loses homogeneity and frays, showing the typical effect of an uneven distribution. For a second verse, the ink is absorbed by the paper and takes shape beyond its inscription zone through brush contact. The ink becomes a stain, penetrates its own surroundings and spreads, either signaling its own compromise with the soaked materiality of the paper or doubling the shapes with a halo effect, a shadow of writing. Finally, drops of ink scattered or sprinkled here and there in the inscription space punctuate the paper and establish a counterpoint effect, capable of evoking its own rhythm and thus giving musicality to the whole. The flowers’ fragrance spreads around in different ways – Wang finally seems to tell us –, and they are at least three: diffusive movement and dynamism, impregnation, and the appearance of in-

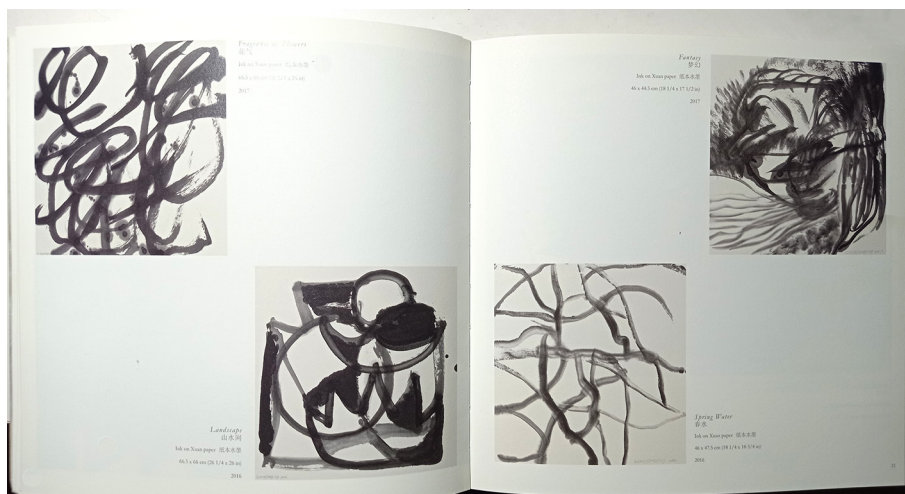


Figure 1. Page from Wang Dongling's Painting & Poetry catalogue.

tensive points. The dramatisation of the polysensorial rendering activates a choreutics of the perfume, which dances on the sheet while tracing secondary lines of becoming, in an increasing complexity.

The corpus of works is in fact traversed by a plural featuring of ink modes, especially oscillating between two extremes: homogeneously saturated, capable of exhibiting perfect blackness, or washed out, absorbed as texture by the inscription surface.

One of the aspects of the art that Wang has developed most productively in his control of brush and ink. Obviously, what he writes exists in two dimensions, but by varying the density of the ink and the speed of this brushstrokes, he is able to create characters that give an impression of depth – indeed, they seem almost sculptural in form, with the strokes weaving in and out of one another. The textures of his ink are fascinating effects that go far beyond what has previously been achieved in Chinese painting, let alone calligraphy. Few can rival the range of tones and effects he manages to achieve. (Barras 2002: 169)

Very interesting in comparison is the work *Spring Water* (Fig. 1, right-hand page), in which we see a branching and criss-crossing of sparse lines, inhabiting the space, lines almost drained of ink. The water as a liquid gushing from the spring finds in the ink another form of liquidity that draws an uncertain grid, leaving the “space between”, the interval, to dominate: there is a desert effect, around those bare springs, given by the absence of figurative references, as if that channeled water were itself a form of thirsty languor. Totally opposite, from a plastic point of view, is the work *Tao* in which the ink is saturated to the utmost degree of blackness. What a Westerner might consider an overfullness, a figure of suffocation, refers back to a maintaining in power every unfolding (cf. Jullien 1991). Chinese black is our white: it contains all chromatic potential. Saturation makes it impossible to still recognise traces and dynamics tracings. The form converges towards an amorphous within which we can meditatively sink, and not be repelled.

Wang Dongling is hence a major case where the tension towards figuration is present in a more figural way, with rather allusive or evocative possibilities hidden in the emerging visual patterns distributed over the surface of inscription. As far as contents are concerned, the reference to Daoism thinking is maintained as a stable horizon of traditional values to be constantly revived.

4. Xu Bing and the creolization of calligraphy

4.1. Critical background

Xu Bing (b. 1955) is the only representative of the authors here discussed who organically combines Chinese and Western texts in a more direct way, as a result of his own journey through two continents, China and America. Celebrated artist, he was awarded the MacArthur Genius Award and the inaugural Artes-Mundi International Prize for Contemporary Art, the world's largest award for visual arts. His works have been exhibited in major art galleries and museums around the world and have been included in many major international exhibitions. In recent years, he has continued to introduce social themes into his Chinese character art, causing to be at the center of a vast critical discourse, in the middle of a controversy as far as the overall interpretation of the relationship between him and the cultural and political world of origin, China. Most of Xu's masterpieces are based on reflections about language and text, exploring the relationship between art and people. "Xu Bing's installations are known for their "meaningless writing", that is to say, for extracting operations from Chinese characters in a way that defies the perceptible and comprehensible conventions of writing" (Lamarre 2019: 79). In 1988, Xu's artistic "pseudo-Chinese characters", which he created through his own design and conception, were exhibited for the first time and received a great response. His subsequent creation in 1994 of an innovative writing system, named Square Word Calligraphy, broke down the cultural barriers between ideograms and the Latin alphabet, and was a reflection on the nature of linguistic communication and whether a rapprochement between East and West could be achieved also through writing systems. From the re-creation of Chinese to the fusion of Chinese and English, he has brought calligraphy to the world as a "universal" concept: "Xu Bing has chosen the "global language", spoken and written all over the world, that today represents the vehicular language for international communication" (Iezzi 2016: 106). The art critics and experts of Chinese writing ways, already noticed the connection between dynamics of the body and the quality of the outcome:

[...] one of the striking features of Xu Bing's use of characters is its avoidance of the more kinetic and gestural possibilities of brushwork, long established in traditions of Chinese calligraphy (...) The fully cursive script pushes this kinesthetic possibility to new limits. Xu Bing's calligraphic style, however, tends to avoid such possibilities: the script for characters in *A Book from the Sky* is that of print rather than calligraphy. It derives from Song dynasty typeface. Two other installations deploying calligraphy, *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994-96) and *Landscript* (2001, 2002) deserve closer at-

tention, for they afford insight into the implications of Xu Bing's avoidance of kinesthetic characters in brushwork. (Lamarre 2019: 92)

4.2. Square Word Calligraphy

Xu has stressed in interviews that no matter what language you speak, whether you are educated or not, words treat everyone in the world equally. This seems to be the reason why he has abandoned the brushwork, gestures and dynamics of traditional Chinese calligraphy, retaining only the most basic square forms as a basis. Although this approach seems to abandon the intrinsic expression of traditional calligraphy, in a sense, it is this “sacrifice” that brings calligraphy closer to everyone, making the “universal language” no longer impractical. Omitting those implicit cultural stigmas (calligraphic techniques, postures, gestures, fonts, etc.) and making them simpler, these abstracted shells of Chinese character forms paired with the English alphabet form a new language system, a set of calligraphy that can belong to all. The Chinese characters are broken down into individual symbols and reassembled with alphabetic symbols in a square configuration to form a new assemblage. And the difficulty of deciphering it is greatly reduced by the joint participation of its two writing systems. This calligraphy, based on Eastern and Western scripts, is therefore a blending of both cultures (*creolization*) and should maybe be seen as part of a wider cultural globalization. As far as the relationship with the original Chinese calligraphy is concerned, a revealing comment comes from Yuedi Liu (2011), who say that “Even if the *qi* of calligraphy is broken, the *yun* [rhythm] of character has survived” (Liu 2011: 107). The *qi* is the term used to focus on the “breath”, the energy component implied in the final written outcome.

4.3. An analytical foray

The Square Word Calligraphy is based on the Tianshu, where the English alphabet is fused into the radicals of the Chinese characters and together, they are framed to form a square character shape. Take Fig. 2, one of Xu's many representations of this genre, *Art for the People*. Morphologically, when we take each Chinese character and disassemble it, we get a series of English letters. For example, the first character can be split into the letters “A”, “R” and “t”. Interestingly, the letter “A” can be recognised morphologically as a combination of the Chinese characters “人” and “一”. Figure 3, for example, can be broken down into “LONG LIFE” and “HAPPInESS” respectively. This shows that English block characters are a new writing system in which English letters are written out in the form of Chinese strokes and combined to form the shape of Chinese characters. Although at a macro level we may not seem to get any meaning, when each of its symbols is simply deciphered, the answer emerges naturally. “His audience is forced to reconsider their assumptions about the value and reliability of the written world” (Erickson 2001: 10-11).

Xu seems to have swapped the roles between ideographic (Chinese) and epigraphic (English) scripts, with the deciphered words doing the ideography and the Chinese characters doing the vocalisation for the calligraphic forms.

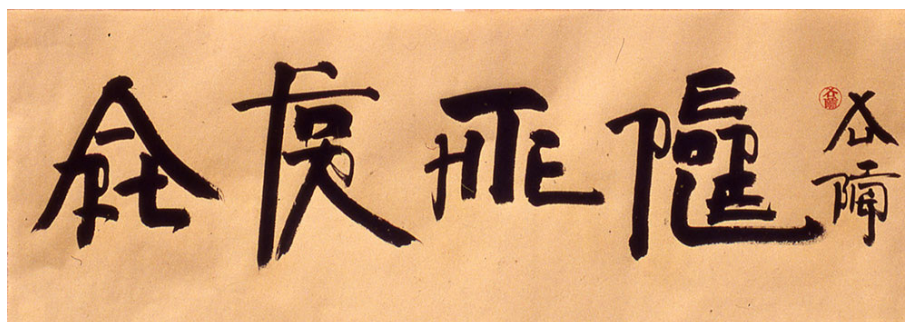


Figure 2. Xu Bing, Art for the people. Ink on paper, 55 x 167.5 cm. Retrieved from: <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-6078335?&lid=1&sc_lang=en>.



Figure 3. Xu Bing, Square Word Calligraphy – Long Life and Happiness. A pair of scrolls, mounted and framed. Ink on paper. Long Life measures 23.5 x 66.9 cm., Happiness measures 36.9 x 69.2 cm. Retrieved from: <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-5998409?&lid=1&sc_lang=en>.

4.4. Xu Bing main features and first comparisons

“Simplified” is an effect of meaning in Xu’s Square Word Calligraphy, mainly dependent on two aspects: firstly, he dropped the specialized techniques of brushwork and gestures, and kept only the simplest basic form of the Chinese character, the square shape, so that it would be visually perceived as belonging to Chinese culture; secondly, he simplified the challenge of recognizing semantic meaning in Chinese characters as ideographs by employing the English alphabet to convey meaning, which was attributed to a Western

	Wang Dongling	Xu Bing
Style	Chaotic Script	Square Word Calligraphy
Features – Expressive Devices	Abstract, painting-inclined	Square-shape, Regularity, Follow specific rules
Readability	Low	High
Participation of writing techniques and gestures	High	Low
Meaning horizon	Artistic conception, spiritual resonance	Cultural communication, meaning transmission

Table 1. Comparison between the Chaotic Script of Wang Dongling and the Square Word Calligraphy of Xu Bing.

enunciation. On the other hand, as far as English is concerned, he renounced to one of the key features of written English which is linearity in the sense that you put a letter after the other. In his new proposal, on the contrary, the letters are stretching in a vertical dimension.

In conclusion, he extracted the most approachable and easily decipherable parts of each of the Eastern and Western scripts and reorganized them, so that Chinese and Western cultures could, in a sense, engage in a dialogue which is also a form of reconciliation. Such practicable compromise enables people to readily approach this new language and produce their own sentences, making this kind of “language” meaningful and accessible.

Finally, let’s compare Wang Dongling and Xu Bing. From the point of view of configuration, Wang’s chaotic script consists only of uninterrupted abstract lines; these dancing and waving lines resemble graffiti paintings more than calligraphy, brimming with sensuous artistic ideas; however, all of that calms down and becomes more organized when we return our attention to Xu Bing’s square word calligraphy which presents individuals a sense of control and even offers a set of principles that people may learn, in contrast to Wang Dongling’s wild calligraphy that invites people to engage their imagination indefinitely. Figuratively speaking, the chaotic script is essentially an unrestricted amplification of the essence and charisma (techniques and gestures) of traditional Chinese calligraphy, which has had to give up its readable nature. Xu Bing’s calligraphy is diametrically distinct from Wang’s in that he avoids employing traditional Chinese calligraphy techniques and gestures as the basis. Instead, he takes the simplest outline as the main body and resorts to English as the character to express the meaning, seeking to convey a definitive message and arrange a smooth dialogue between different cultures. Nonetheless, there is a connection between the two calligraphers. Wang’s calligraphic figurativeness can easily be linked to Western abstract art, and it seems that in a sense he is also attempting to complete some kind of dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures in an obscure form through calligraphy; Xu, on the other hand, is trying to create a common language in a more direct way in order to realize the conveyance of meaning in the most superficial sense (Tab.1).

5. Lui Shou Kwan and the Zen paintings

5.1. Critical background

Lui Shou Kwan (b. 1919) is more known as a painter rather than a calligrapher. In 1971 he was awarded an MBE by the Queen, the first Hong Kong painter to receive this honour. He was a pioneer of the new ink and wash movement in Hong Kong, attempting to incorporate both Western art theory and traditional Chinese art into his work, causing a wonderful chemical reaction that allowed the ink and wash movement in Hong Kong to flourish. “Rather than essentializing the tradition of Chinese painting, he is clearly open to a variety of external influences with a view to using them to give Chinese painting resilience” (Lai 2011: 184). By skillfully applying the elements of ink and wash in traditional Chinese painting, he retains its unique artistic flavour and cultural value and presents the versatility and strong expressive power of ink and wash in a new form of composition, taking Chinese painting to another level. Despite Lui’s worldwide reputation as a painter, in his later years he became obsessed with Buddhism, resulting in an even more striking series of Zen paintings. The images in this series differ from previous landscape paintings in that he uses mainly the brushwork and techniques of writing Chinese calligraphy to express them. He attempts to convey a spiritual depth with the simplest of compositions and brushwork.

5.2. Zen Painting

The Zen painting series is one of the few works in which Lui uses calligraphic techniques as a primary means of expression. The vast majority of Lui Shou Kwan’s Zen paintings are created in a non-figurative manner, reminiscent of the immediacy of the abstract works of many Western Expressionist painters (Lai 2011: 229). Still, this series uses the image of the lotus as a Buddhist symbol to carry a thick convergence of emotions and meanings (purity, unmoved stability, unperturbed condition, spiritual transcendence). From a configurational point of view, most of the series consists of two main parts, one with red strokes as a symbol for the lotus flower, the other with the use of large, strong, broad black strokes with different brushwork and inking techniques as a representation of the lotus leaf. He occasionally used text to sign and date his work, or added a stamp to balance the composition. Metaphorically, Lui’s use of these simple geometric and colour combinations, complemented by the uniquely inspired expression of Chinese calligraphy, conveys an understanding of the secular world and the meaning of life as he understands it. In this series of his works, he pays great attention to the use of calligraphic brushwork and ink. We can also feel in the brush strokes the movement of his body and gestures as he works, not far from the Western experiences of action paintings or dripping. In any case, we can shortly recognize a tension toward a representative figuration, the unfolding not only of an isolated icon, but of a scene, with an observer inside. This process of “naturalization” (cf. Fontanille 1998) is another way of altering the scriptural value of the calligraphic technique.



Figure 4 (left). Lui Shou Kwan, *Zen*. Scroll, mounted and framed. Ink and colour on paper. 121 x 60.5 cm, 1970. Retrieved from: <<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6206098>>.

Figure 5 (right). Lui Shou Kwan, *Purity*. Scroll, mounted and framed. Ink and colour on paper. 180 x 97 cm., 1970. Retrieved from: <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-6238487?lid=1&sc_lang=en>.

5.3. An analytical foray

First, take an example from the Zen painting series (Fig. 4). This work employs an expressive technique commonly used by Lui in the Zen painting series to depict lotus flowers. From a figurative point of view, we can start recognizing a naturalistic scenario, even if rarefied, close to abstraction: Lui uses abstract blocks of colour to try to recreate the lotus flower at the height of summer bloom through changes in colour and changes in the form of the ink. The red parts represent the lotus flower itself, of course, while the spattered columns of ink in the middle formed by the ink splash technique represent the stem, and the rectangular strokes of varying shades and directions below form an endless array of lotus leaves. From a compositional point of view, the use of white space for much of the upper part of the painting makes the whole image prominent and very “breathing”. At the same time, the text on the left and the seal below it, along with the two lower corners, add to the vitality of the image.

This artwork can be compared to the piece *Purity* (Fig. 5) in terms of style. The second work could appear more abstract in its depiction of a lotus leaf, using a dry ink technique, and the leaf is narrower, yet thicker and more vibrant, more like a budding lotus bun in early summer. The two calligraphic characters at the top of the painting, “Purity”, directly illustrate the central idea of the work, that the lotus is the embodiment of purity.

Lui Shou Kwan’s Zen painting series is distinguished first and foremost by the dimension of chromatic values: the contrast between black and red. The red color here is not merely a representation of the seal in traditional Chinese calligraphy, but it is also part of the most essential statement of the composition’s significance, the lotus flower. To give this abstract hue a concrete image, he employed various brushstrokes and ink techniques in an effort to create another concrete entity, notably lotus leaves, deploying abstract color blocks. More significantly, he leverages the contrast of various inking techniques, such as thick ink and light ink, dry ink, and wet ink, to portray an atmosphere of spatial layering as well as a sense of time and space. For example, the light ink depicts the more youthful grass-green leaves of the lotus in early summer, while the thicker ink suggests the more lush dark green leaves of the lotus in high summer. The lotus flower thrives in the mud, and in such a messy and difficult setting, the lotus flower develops so pure and pristine. From a figurative perspective, the lotus blossom, which features primarily in Lui’s Zen painting, additionally stands in for the ideologies of tranquility, stability, and mental purity that are presented in this series.

As we move from a stand-alone configuration to an overall compositional perspective, the Zen painting continues one of the most iconic techniques in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, leaving white space. And this white space complements the imagery represented by the lotus flower in the work. On the other hand, this topological opposition not only illustrates the contiguity in the sense of the physical and spatial closeness between calligraphy and painting in terms of the way of presence but also the continuity in the gestures suggesting that there is a sort of process of transition between the writing and the painting.

6. Wang Tiande, calligraphy on fire

6.1. Critical background

Wang Tiande (b. 1960) is a Chinese contemporary artist known for his research from the very beginning in the field of calligraphy. “I struggled to find creative inspiration from deeply rooted traditions. While my friends turned to oil painting, I redefined ink painting and calligraphy, the most value-laden of China’s art forms” (Wang Tiande 2005: 4).

His long career is marked, it seems, by a chance event (serendipity, he himself would say), a cigarette burn on Xuan paper during a Parisian residency in 2002, the effect of which has become over time the defining characteristic of his calligraphic art.

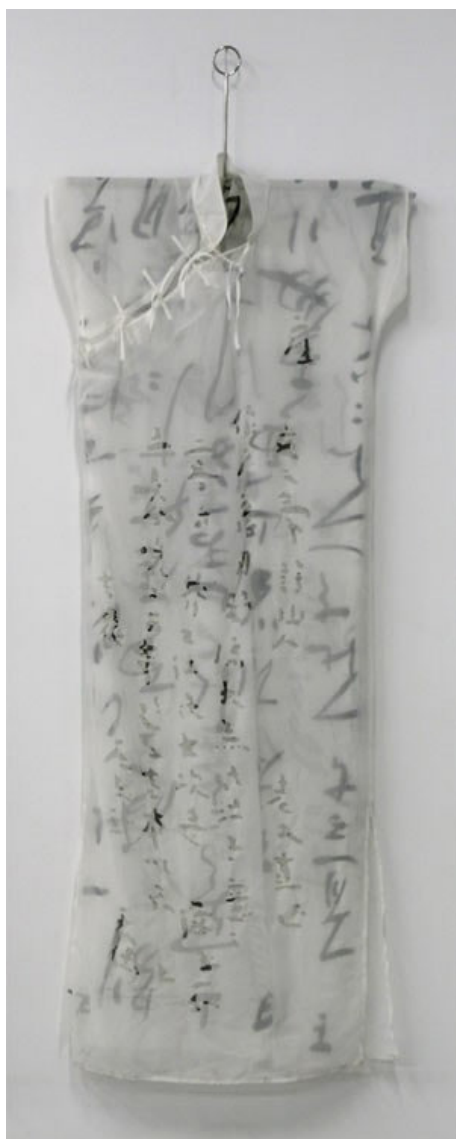


Figure 6. Wang Tiande, *Chinese Clothes No. 04-D01*
中国服装, 2004.

Silk cloth, Chinese ink, burn marks. Dimensions:
163 x 86 cm. Image retrieved from:

<http://www.chambersfineart.com/artists/wang-tiande?-view=slider#2>.

Recognizing the chance to develop a unique style, he devoted the next 15 years to evolving and perfecting it by using incense sticks to create silhouettes of calligraphy and paintings, one stroke at a time. His pictorial language, comprising burned marks on bast paper, meticulously layered onto an ink painting he has done on Xuan paper, and sometimes audaciously mounted over an original ancient work, invites reflection on the synthesis of past and present, technicality and spirituality, legacy and potential. (Xin de la Guerrande 2017: 1)

Critics debate about the readability of his calligraphic experiments. Nakatani (2009) talks about a barely legible and comprehensible writing, given by the overlapping of layers. Zhang Cziráková also points out the threshold between figurative and abstract rendering:

[...] he writes calligraphy, which is also on the border of semi abstract motives. His abstract paintings consist of compositions in the form of traditional Chinese fan, which delivers a certain degree of “acceptability” to abstract painting in the Chinese cultural background. (Zhang Cziráková 2017: 167)

6.2. Analytical notes

Tiande’s peculiar mode of writing, through ink burns, begins and finds full expression in the “Digital” series, the title of which should be read in an ironic key (as underlined by Tancock in introducing Tiande 2005) and was later also adopted for more illustrative compositions. The meaning of this treatment of writing can thus be investigated within the framework of a semiotics of practices. The incense stick replaces the paintbrush but allows for an almost precise contact with the paper. Unlike ink, it is evidently no longer a question of impregnation but of controlled burning in its extension. Indeed, the incense manages to contain the burn, enhancing the precision of the contours, for potentially legible writing. The burn reveals the underlying layer, activating a contradictory dynamic of simultaneous addition and subtraction. The layering is precisely the multiplication of the enclosures-surfaces of inscription. Paper as a second skin is confirmed in this analogy with the body in the design of traditional garments containing writing (Fig. 6). Paper dramatises its own overall tightness (*compactness*), protects the traditional core that lies beneath, as memory, pressure of the past, genealogical antecedent, offers the very form of the layer and becomes the surface of inscription, in the double sense of appositive writing and of wound that opens a passage, a breach, towards that remnant of the past that barely transpires. The veiling of the image suggests an aesthetic of superimposition. It intercepts a paradoxical mode of unveiling in the covering. It is only by covering that something is revealed. Tiande often insists in his interviews on the “slow” character of artistic practice. The image emerges from this slow addition of layers, just as, on the single layer, pencil, brush and ink overlap.

Contrary to Lui, the confrontation with the long lasting tradition associated with calligraphy is dramatized in Tiande, maintaining the privilege for the writing effect (vs. the pictorial one) even if pushing the limits of readability. Calligraphy and Daoism are posed as an inevitable reference, like an obsession, for an ongoing inextinguishable dialogue.

7. A semiotic comparison

The four authors we have introduced here represent as many ways of deriving and altering such a complex cultural form as calligraphy. In its most traditional version, precisely thanks to the mediation of practice, calligraphy becomes in itself a *form of life*, capable of holding together textual production, with the variety of related genres, and material objects, including the brush or ink, while the practice of writing, infinitely zoomable in its micro-complexi-

ties,⁵ accommodates a strategic dimension, such as ritual scansion, to ultimately become a translator of the values of Daoism or Confucianism. Calligraphy as a way of actualising “analogists” cosmologies, as Descola (2006) would say. The extension of this particular form thus brings into play, on the one hand, the recognisability of forms of expression, the reference to a precise script of tradition. As we have seen, Xu Bing works on dissimulating effects: what appears to be Chinese can be read as English, despite the different scriptural orientation. This game of veridiction makes the new system open to talk about anything else, including the migration experience itself. No longer bound in a privileged way to certain contents, the system can be part of new practices of experimentation of the self, in a decidedly playful emancipation-oriented perspective. For his part, Wang Dongling, albeit in the case of the chaos script, produces a calligraphy that is unrecognisable, altered and compromised in its notational dimension. Tiande, too, renders burnt characters almost illegible, while preserving traditional forms of content in his horizon. Lui, on the other hand, consigns some characters to a figurative transfiguration: they become allusive images, different iconic suggestions from those possibly concealed in the heart of the ideogram. The four authors show different interests with respect to a horizon of cultural contents. Xu Bing, we might suggest, takes a critical attitude towards the very significance of writing, bringing it to exhaustion. Xu Bing recounts his personal journey within the talkability of a partly dramatic experience (the need to flee China), not unlike many international artists with whom his experience resonates. Wang Dongling, on the other hand, re-proposes a mostly Daoist-inspired philosophy, thus in continuity with tradition, revived. Even Tiande, who began his career by attempting to symbolically get rid of ink, ends up getting caught up in an original re-proposition of a scriptural aesthetic linked to traditional content. Lui, finally, is immersed in a revival of Buddhist way of thinking, so, in line with oriental philosophies of life.

8. Conclusions and relaunches

We propose to think of these four different trajectories as different ways of altering a traditional form of life, inscribed in the renewed tension between writing practice and textual outcomes. Such a form of life is thus fueled by a drive towards scriptural figuration, where figuration is more a way of resonating with the circulation of the breath of life in the world of experience. The legible notation of the character thus represents the outcome of such figuration always ready to reactivate the force inscribed in it. All the investigated cases question this figuration, with different and comparable options in relation to this semantic background. Tiande operates a *critical deconstruction* of writing: his new proposal of writing by burning takes on, on the whole, an argumentative value: the writing in ink becomes opaque, it is barely legible as a background-noise in the overlapping of layers that establish two contradictory movements of covering and unveiling. Wang Dongling, on the other

⁵ Yen (2005), for instance, discusses the refined traditional theories of the single stroke execution, with an aspectualization of the micro-process.

hand, operates an *in-figuration* of calligraphic practice (cf. Basso Fossali 2013 for the concept of infiguration), as he retrieves its figural sense, its embedded component, in order to undermine the figurative stability of a legible handwriting, which is no longer needed. It is calligraphy figurally projected into a purely expressive gesturality, hence the link with Western abstract art. Lui, on the other hand, is the protagonist of what we might identify as *transfiguration*, a push towards a return to the figurative image of the painting, an image “other” than the one possibly contained in the ideogram, such as that of the lotus. Such transfiguration in turn seems to bring the processual nature of writing into focus, maintaining a balanced tension between legibility and pictorial feature. Xu Bing, finally, is oriented towards a *reconfiguration*, that is, an assumption of the practice, remodelled without the whole kinetic component, which modifies both the expressive devices (it is no longer Chinese) and the horizon of contents (one can freely displace the content dominances). We will finally have an integrated framework of alternative alterations that we can organise, starting from internal compatibilities and contrasts, as follows:

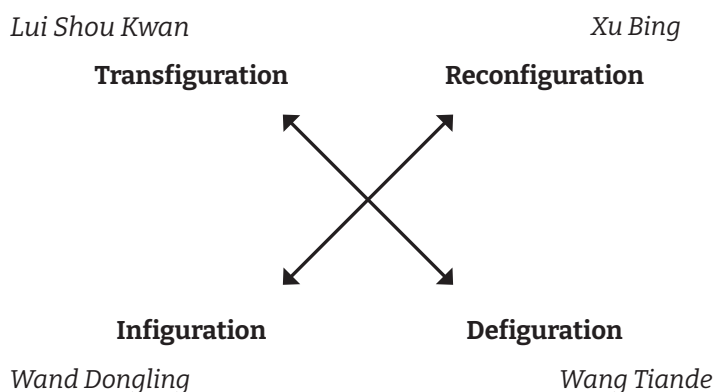


Figure 7. Alteration processes of Chinese calligraphy.

These positions, we argue, represent forms of alteration of a primary figuration, which is the one pertaining to Chinese calligraphy in relation to a traditional form of life. Xu Bing and Lui Shou Kwan are in a position of contrariety, on several featuring traits: relevance and irrelevance of the sensorimotor component, connection or disconnection with the traditional contents, tension towards figuration of an image as opposed to a new legibility that starts from another language, hence another notational system. Tiande and Wang would instead be in intermediary and transitional positions. Wang as being moved by a tension towards para-scriptural figural patterning, in line with fully assumed Daoist contents (hence more complementary to Lui), as opposed to Wang Tiande who is more interested in a critical discourse on calligraphy, denying the dynamic transport of the breath by transforming its meaning through the substitution of ink with fire and maintaining a research

oriented towards a resulting aestheticisation (the skin effect of his works is not surprisingly applied to the domain of clothes).

Several questions around this final modelling remain, starting with a simple one: how much is this model actually heuristic and potentially generalizable? Other tests, within other contemporary Chinese calligraphers are surely welcomed. Our proposal would also benefit from further theoretical investigations, as well as from analysis coming from other anthroposemiotic terrains. We tried to evidence how the semiotics of cultural approaches the lively revival of a long-lasting tradition only through the lenses of changes and alterations, in the greimassian tenant that meaning is graspable only when transformed.

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