

Revival and Innovation: The Paradox of Contemporary Developments of Calligraphy

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Introduction

It is true that only those who have read the ancient texts can hold them in the greatest contempt. After all, you must know your enemy in order to discern his weaknesses and set his strengths against him.¹

Lu Xun (1881-1936) believed that true criticism requires an in-depth understanding of the subject being criticized in order to have an impact. An entire generation was shaken by the force of Lu Xun's criticism of tradition, precisely because of his flawless grasp of such. Interestingly, the external perspective developed by Lu Xun was based on his extensive exposure to Western learning as an overseas student in Japan. At different periods in history, supporters of old and new have sought to dissociate themselves from calligraphic styles in vogue at the time. They felt that the future of calligraphy was in their hands. Arguments between these people often resulted in all-or-nothing propositions; they attempted to debate matters in terms of contemporary ideological trends for what they deemed the benefit of calligraphy.

I.Divergence Over the Classics: Redefinition of Norms

Calligraphies with an emphasis on character design exist in other cultures, but none have been elevated to the same exalted status of Chinese calligraphy in their own culture, so much so that they have become a key symbol of cultural identity. Factors such as a tradition of venerating Chinese characters, the in-depth engagement of emperors and high-ranking individuals in ancient society, as well as a widespread social recognition all make calligraphy an art form with an extensive following among traditional Chinese societies.

In a world like today, where we are used to an environment with cultural pluralism, the art of calligraphy—with such a widespread following among Chinese societies and such an enduring history—is

faced with challenges and reforms over its practicality. On the one hand, the rich cultural heritage of calligraphy means it can be used as a creative resource. On the other, the normative implications of such a massive cultural resource make any artistic breakthroughs hardly possible. The impact of Asian and Western cultural exchanges since the 20th century opened immense possibilities for the future of calligraphy through developments in Western contemporary arts, but also entailed a number of problems.

The future of calligraphy is not determined by our optimism or pessimism. It is instead crucial to see the big picture during an examination of contemporary calligraphy.

The divergence in contemporary theories of calligraphy are mainly linked to the withdrawal of calligraphy from practical, everyday use. As a result, for the last century, ideas on calligraphy have wavered between an art form with general social acceptance and everyday usage, and an art form for expression of creativity that highlights the artistic value of the work itself. The former calls for a return to tradition as well as an emphasis on self-discipline and cultural significance. Calligraphy is treated as a legacy to be upheld. The latter calls for reforms, with an emphasis on expressing the contemporary spirit of calligraphy and exploring its artistic value. Both approaches have their own justifications and grand missions that typify the pluralistic nature of contemporary calligraphy.

Those who espouse tradition consider their legacy to be classic works and relevant cultural literacy. Cultural sophistication is however such a massive topic, so discussions generally focus on the learning of ancient classics. The formation of classical paradigms in Chinese calligraphy was influenced by Confucian orthodoxy². Wang Xizhi was elevated to the epitome of calligraphy, just like Confucius was venerated by Confucian scholars. The tradition of model-book calligraphy may have gone through several upheavals since Wang Xizhi times, but its status was never really challenged. Confucius said: “I teach and do not innovate; I trust and am fond of antiquity.” This traditional value not only influenced how ancient literati viewed the classics, but also affected all other domains. The importance of emulation in calligraphy is representative of this attitude. Thus, a cultural mindset of focusing efforts on interpretation of classics without emphasis on individual creativity was developed. Differentiation resulted from distinctness in people’s stances and the expectations of their dynasty. Even those who dared to follow their own fancies still turned to the Six Chinese Classics as their foothold in order to gain some form of legitimacy. The interpretation of classical paradigms in calligraphy served to construct a massive evaluation system that then defined the norms of calligraphic practice. Model-book calligraphy derived from classical paradigms and the correct form of characters thus became the two normative factors most often mentioned in calligraphic instruction. Everyone accepted that “emulation and correct characters were the essentials of writing calligraphy”. Some may challenge the relationship between calligraphy and characters, but if there are no characters, then there is no writing, and therefore no calligraphy. In that case, can there be a change in what classical subject-matter is studied? Furthermore, whether classics could be done away with and similar issues were frequently discussed and even hotly debated at the time.

The emergence of the stele school during the Qing dynasty offered calligraphy a new model outside of model-book calligraphy and paradigms inherited from Wang Xizhi and his son, Wang Xianzhi. It replenished creative resources and was able to legitimize itself through a new theorization. It just so happened that Fu Shan—the founder of the stele school—based his ideas on Taoism—a school of thought opposite to that of Confucianism³. Taoism's focus on nature and lifelike portrayal gave it advantage over contemporary model-book calligraphy, which had become a mere shadow of its former self by then. Moreover, Chien-Chia textual criticism placed the limelight on stele inscriptions dating from the Han and Wei dynasties that kept emerging at the time; these became a new model to be followed. Kang Youwei (1858–1927)—the self-proclaimed successor of the Kung-Yang School—followed his school's tradition of simple words with deep meanings and justifying reforms through ancient precedents to single-handedly transform how contemporaries understood the Confucian classics and infusing them with revolutionary ideas, all in response to the situation at the time. By highlighting steles and downplaying model-books in calligraphy, he changed people's perception of calligraphy classics. He offered a new domain for people to explore, redefining the features of calligraphy.

Some claim that the stele school was to Chinese calligraphy what impressionism was to Western art; they completely changed what people accepted as the norm in calligraphy and in art, respectively⁴. The study of form and the idea of *pibei*⁵ proposed by Kang Youwei can therefore be considered a brand-new stage in the development of Chinese calligraphy itself, i.e., visual form was now the focus of calligraphy artworks. Whether we agree with it or not, this calligraphic model with a focus on visual form attracted far more attention than all other elements in calligraphy. This may be due to a more stringent artistic thought or a culture centered around exhibition halls. We can see signs of this in the capriciousness of modern calligraphy in Japan after World War II, as well as the calligraphy movements in both Taiwan and mainland China after the 1980s and 1990s.

The grassroots calligraphy movement followed a theory-led approach as well. The debate triggered by its development was quite meaningful and represented the efforts towards self-challenge made by contemporary calligraphers. As previously mentioned, ever since the stele school, many sought to overthrow the dominance of Jin and Tang dynasty model-book calligraphy from Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi. A true revolution in art would, however, take far more than just a change in form. Though Kang Youwei idea of *pibei* did include the learning of novel forms, it failed to consider that this approach merely took a model that produced distinct calligraphic features; the result was unfamiliar for the viewer only due to variations of the three formal elements in calligraphy: use of brush, structure, and layout. Grassroots calligraphy was proposed in the 1990s and can be thought of as calligraphic formalism. It attempted to build on the stele school philosophy of Kang Youwei and promote the calligraphy of non-masters based on the stele school's narrative of images made by poor country people as a match for the paradigms set by calligraphy masters⁶. Their formalist stance can be seen in the following narratives:

When observed from a new aesthetic angle, it is the sharp, brusque lines and the spontaneous, free-flowing creativity that imbued the balanced elegance of traditional Chinese calligraphy with an entirely different rhythmic flow. This new rhythmic flow just happened to match the *ostranenie* of the artistic lexicon that many Chinese and foreign masters strove to achieve, as well as the psychological and aesthetic stimuli of the unfamiliar... Another golden age in the history of calligraphy started thus.⁷

The grassroots calligraphy model constructed by the likes of Ma Hsiao (1962–) and Wo Hsinghwa (1955–) (fig.1)⁸ can be thought of as the legacy of Kang Youwei study of form and *pibei* philosophy⁹. The works of grassroots calligraphy created by Wo Hsinghwa and others in recent years have continued to follow the direction set by *pibei*, while also taking formalism to an extreme. However, with regard to brush technique, they did not draw from any old traditions nor established an internal system of their own, making it difficult for successors to find new opportunities for development; thus, the movement's influence is weakening.

Inoue Yuichi (1916–1985) became a legend through his ascetic devotion to modern calligraphy, where the force of thoughts and concepts was incorporated into the ink and brush. When we compare notable works such as *Gutesu* (fig.2)¹⁰, *Fushigi*, and *Hin* against the ideals of grassroots calligraphy, we can see that Inoue satisfied the pursuit of irregularity and piquancy¹¹, but also accomplished far more. Nonetheless, it is obvious that Inoue did not draw on the elements proposed by grassroots calligraphy for inspiration. Instead, when faced with the impact of contemporary Western art, he engaged in a complex dialectic process between thought and practice in order to get in touch with the innermost essence of the human spirit.

The impetus of Grassroots Calligraphy is now on the wane, and its failure was rooted in how the pursuit of freedom and simplicity was based on the works of all non-masters from ancient times; this approach did not withstand scrutiny on historical authenticity, nor could its thought and practice establish a link between contemporary calligraphy and freedom, or between simplicity and calligraphy. This is also why Inoue Yuichi is considered to have made greater inroads than grassroots calligraphy practitioners.

All of the above occurred within the identity crisis of tradition. Tradition itself is the vessel of complex ideas. Even the perception of classic motifs can lead to major debates. Any attempt to understand tradition through its simplification, as well as calls to abandon or embrace tradition may ultimately evolve into a discussion of tradition in an abstract and conflicting framework, rather than actually confronting the historical issues of calligraphy.

The complexity of tradition and the difficulty of standardization are why no calligrapher in history has ever managed to master the various existent schools. No matter what classical paradigm a calligrapher pursues, the practitioner must possess the required skillfulness with ink and brush in order to accomplish its mastery. If we observe the late Ming dynasty calligrapher Wang Duo, we find that his ability to emu-

late the ancients was among the best of the times. He was familiar with norms of the model-book tradition and was able to develop new twists that turned into innovative applications, such as the unusual linking of writing axes, and overlapping dual axes. All of these had a very important role in history¹². No one can cast doubt upon the technique of great calligraphers in history. The problem was that new forms were not imagined out of nowhere. Beyond the forms lay the calligrapher's life experiences, emotions, personality, and other factors linked to material conditions. These infused forms with the calligrapher's outlooks in addition to the significance of their historical style.

The complexities of tradition require the practitioner to absorb classic patterns—built up through everyday writing over the years by outstanding calligraphers in each dynasty. The practitioner must then develop his own ways of expression over time until reaching maturity. This is a very long process and leaves little room for taking on new artistic challenges. Following the path of traditional calligraphy, nonetheless, has its own difficulties. In addition to the external factor of a change in the audience—from the cultural upper class to the ordinary public, there is also an urgent need to update the individual understanding of tradition. Calligraphy must be re-examined in conjunction with contemporary humanities to re-assess the lexicon of traditional calligraphy and construct a model of discourse for speaking about it. Otherwise, it will only be rendered obsolete like *Don Quixote's* gallant warrior.

II. Reformation through Revival of the Classics

The attitude to tradition in contemporary calligraphy can be illustrated through the ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). Their different attitudes toward the classics will help us understand the revival phenomenon in the contemporary calligraphy scene¹³. Dilthey believed that it was possible to eliminate one's own contemporary consciousness and become so fully immersed in a certain historical scenario that a different existence would be created within one's own body. In this view of history, tradition is thought of as a separate identity. There is a clear divide between the past and the present. As a result, there is a tendency towards rejection during the reversion to a certain stage in history. Gadamer, on the other hand, believed that all human thought and consciousness are influenced to some degree by historical conditions. Human beings are themselves products of history, so even logical thinking is influenced by history as well. He viewed tradition as a work in progress and emphasized the continuity of history.

Should restoration today be based on the preservation of a national spirit or traditional crafts, with tradition being preserved in museums? Or should tradition be revitalized through a revival that creates the stimulus for further progress? Differences in motivation may cause these seemingly conservative behaviors to produce different outcomes.

Calligraphy education in China Academy of Art over the last two decades have focused on precise emulation, with an emphasis on form. Less attention is paid to dynamic factors of brush force. A group of calligraphers that concentrated on studying the style of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi was influenced by

this method. Leaders of this trend are best exemplified by Chen Zhongkang (1968–)(fig.3)¹⁴, in his middle age, as well as his younger successors Wang Yijun (1978–) and Wang Ke (1978–); these calligraphers have achieved recognition and generated interest at competitions and exhibitions throughout mainland China. This emerging force in the calligraphy scene is distinct from the formalism-centric movements of “grass-roots calligraphy”, “popular calligraphy”, and “artistic calligraphy.” It is also completely different from the large axis of Ming-Qing style that was in vogue during the late 20th century, making it a contemporary example of the revival phenomenon in calligraphy that deserves our attention.

Their ideals are similar to those pursued by Shen Yinmo (1883–1971), Pan Boying (1905–1965), and Bai Jiao (1907–1969) during the early Republican years, an epoch dominated by the stele school¹⁵. There were some differences as well. The Palace Museum in Peking published a batch of correspondence by Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi in collotype that perfectly replicated the originals, a move that created hope for the revival of model-book calligraphy even as it was beset by the stele school. This is because part of the argument made by Kang Youwei stele school was based on the claim that Jin and Tang model-books became distorted through repeated replication. The stele school was still very much on the rise in the early Republican years, however. The students of Lee Ruiqing (1867–1920), such as Hu Xiaoshi (1888–1962) and Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), as well as Tai Chingnung (1902–1990) who was strongly influenced by Hu Xiaoshi, all remained quite influential well into the second half of the 20th century. Though the model-book calligraphy school began to recover in the early 20th century, the first person to have any significant influence was Shen Yinmo during the early years of the Cultural Revolution after the Communist regime was established.

The younger generation of mainland Chinese calligraphers following the contemporary model-book calligraphy school now live in an era with a well-developed economy and relatively stable politics. They therefore have access to far more calligraphy works in private and public collections in China and overseas, high-resolution publishing, and perfect replicas than their forebearers did in the Republican years. Historical research has become detailed as well, making the conditions ripe for classic revival. Confucianism has also been accepted by the literary community in mainland China and is being taught again. The orthodoxy concept that had gradually disappeared after the cataclysm that was the Cultural Revolution is now being quickly revived as part of the “Chinese Dream”. The return to orthodoxy and the classics in calligraphy is therefore not a product of chance. As previously noted, model-book calligraphy is closely interconnected with orthodoxy. The new model-book calligraphy school therefore has greater momentum today than during Republican years when the New Culture Movement opposed tradition and orthodoxy.

This particular variant of the Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi tradition is characterized by relatively sophisticated control of lines and their movement. Though they set out to reproduce the antique feel of the Jin dynasty, the result is more akin to that of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Chen Zhongkang traced the style of Pai Chiao—prodigy of the Shanghai school—back to Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi. Wang Yijun has emulated the correspondence of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi as well as Song dynasty callig-

raphy, and has received multiple accolades thanks to the style of such correspondence. More recently, the techniques of Chen and Wang resemble more those in Ming dynasty calligraphy. As for Wang Ko, he is a student of ancient cursive script, and his pressing strokes tend to go downward with a sharp and vigorous force, in a manner similar to that of Kangli Zishan from the Yuan dynasty. For these revivalist calligraphers of the younger generation, if they did not truly comprehend the implications of inheriting this ancient calligraphic legacy, are they then treating the old as new? Or are they reviving the old for the sake of preservation? Placing oneself in the painstaking practice of calligraphy with logical analysis and comprehension is an approach which products are worth looking forward to. Talk of classic revival brings to mind Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) of the Yuan dynasty. Regardless of whether Zhao Mengfu's original intention was to steer away from the melancholic calligraphy of Southern Song, or oppose the Yuan dynasty Mongolian regime by highlighting Han Chinese cultural identity, his reversion to the orthodoxy and veneration of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi must have been motivated by some logical reason. Nonetheless, classic revival with a strategic purpose also brings its own problem: the reluctance to overstep the formal boundaries imposed by the classic tradition because any calligraphic expression in excess of these would run counter to the purpose of the revival. This would diminish the rich variety of classical forms, but such issue may have escaped notice during Zhao Mengfu's time¹⁶. Unless contemporary revivalists intend to pay the same price, then this is a problem that must be dealt with.

Another revivalist that we can learn from is Wang Duo (1592–1652) of the late Ming dynasty. As someone who devoted his entire life to Jin-Tang model-book calligraphy, his discourse emphasized the importance of exploring the intricate details of ancient works. His emulations of ancient calligraphy also captured that spirit faithfully. To Wang Duo, however, the norms defined by classical forms became the basis for his personal expression. The classical forms were then modified and such variations used to create new norms that became the Wang Duo style so familiar to us all. From the above, we can see that Zhao Mengfu's revival ideas were closer to those of Dilthey; Wang Duo's were closer to that of Gadamer, as he threw himself into the torrents of history and took it from there.

Thus, a discussion on the calligraphers of the contemporary model-book calligraphy school should not only look at their artistic choices, which set them apart from existing styles, but also consider whether such contemporary souls can be placed within the norms of classical forms without feeling suppressed or constrained at all. Worryingly, as mentioned before, their academic training emphasizes the pursuit of form rather than the dynamic elements of brush force¹⁷. As a result, even if they are filled with overwhelming emotion, they could still find it hard to express it through ink and paper. Unfortunately, despite this movement has the potential to surpass the practice of grassroots calligraphy and other movements, it may only go as far as an evenly matched contest over form.

Furthermore, traditional calligraphy as represented by classic model-book calligraphy is inextricably linked to the entirety of traditional Chinese culture, i.e., the Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophies. This connection is both an asset and a burden. How can we selectively inherit the cultural literacy

of past literati? On a higher level, there is a light at the end of the tunnel in the pursuit of calligraphic technique in new model-book calligraphy. Qiu Zhengzong, for example, said that “Chen Zhongkang’s best works have now surpassed that of many Ming and Qing dynasties calligraphers”¹⁸ in recognition of his pursuit of the classics, showing that he could now be ranked alongside calligraphers of old. What his discourse also left unsaid was that: the true competitors are the finest calligraphers of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Qiu Zhengzong (1947–) established a rigorous basis for the research of contemporary calligraphic forms. He also proposed the idea of “micro-form”¹⁹. His study efforts opened further horizons for inquiries on form. The theory of calligraphic form constructed by Qiu Zhengzong would go on to influence most individuals’ understanding of calligraphy. However, Qiu Zhengzong’s studies on form have begun to analyze issues beyond the visible. The idea of “micro-form” he proposed is similar the ideas of “spirit” and “chi” in traditional theories of calligraphy.²⁰ In other words, the purpose of classical norms is to provide a way of conversing with outstanding calligraphic figures from ancient times, which should then serve as a basis for re-examining the contemporary zeitgeist and re-evaluating one’s position among past and present, East and West, so that a new subject can be formed on an abstract level, with an emphasis on human-centric moral philosophy. This may very well determine the success or failure of new model-book calligraphy²¹.

III. Reformers: New Barbarism in Calligraphy

Memorable names of post-WWII modern calligraphy have remained largely unchanged. Since 1945, there have been *Ai* by Ueda Sokyu (1899–1968), *Hokai* by Teshima Yukei (1901–1987), and *Getsu* by Inoue Yuichi (1916–1985)...²² These modern Japanese calligraphers were faced with an onslaught of Western art after the end of WWII, at a time when calligraphy was still used on a daily basis. Amidst their own cultural crisis, they were inspired by the visual expression of Western art to channel all of their pent-up feelings through the ink and brush in a direct and frank manner. Hsiung Pingming once said: “I believed that the deadlock could only be broken by looking outside. There is no calligraphy in the West, but modern abstract art has many things in common with calligraphy. Japanese experiments and breakthroughs in calligraphy from recent years have provided us with a great deal of stimulation and inspiration. If Chinese calligraphy is to be imbued with new life, we must draw boldly on their experiences and accomplishments. How can we do so? I think there are two approaches: one is rational and the other irrational.”²³ His words meant that the traditions established by abstract expressionism and Japanese modern calligraphy transcended cultural and national boundaries to become an enduring legacy. If we look at these modern Japanese calligraphers, we find that they were all familiar with the lexicon of traditional calligraphy in the first place. In a period where calligraphy was not yet fully separated from everyday use, their creation of such unconventional works must have truly shocked their contemporary audience—so used to traditional calligraphy—with the contrast in aesthetics and sense of unorthodoxy. The inner journey of

their artistic transformation was probably based on the irrational factors mentioned by Hsiung Ping-ming, an expert in Freudian psycho-analysis.

Today, this type of unconventional calligraphic expression has become a “modern calligraphy” tradition, one of the creative options for contemporary calligraphy practitioners. A special note should be made of Inoue Yuichi when talking about the tradition of contemporary calligraphy. He exemplifies a full-out “revolution against the conservative calligraphy circles” and “readiness for self-purgation”²⁴. Nonetheless, two facts deserve strong attention: First, Inoue Yuichi admitted that after two years of creating without characters, he was burned out. This proves how indispensable Chinese characters are to the calligrapher. Also, the asceticism of Inoue enriched his ideas of “revolution” and “purge”. It may be more accurate to say that this asceticism matched that of ancient calligraphers, lauded for turning ponds black with ink and piling up mountains of broken brushes. This also reflects how Inoue’s practice made clear distinction between calligraphy of that dynasty and abstract expressionism. The rigor of Inoue’s asceticism also indicated that modern calligraphy should not serve as a crutch for opportunists.

Classic works of modern calligraphy can be defined through the two key factors in traditional aesthetics: “form” and “content”, i.e., interpretation on the zeitgeist and updating of the calligraphic lexicon. Interpretation on the zeitgeist may come from exposure to Western artistic expression due to the clash of cultures between East and West, the breakdown of traditional values, a sense of national defeat from World War II, and the horrors of nuclear explosion. In terms of common calligraphic lexicon, however, they all employed brush strokes that did away with traditional touch and larger compositions to express the sense of collapse in their dynasty. This reflected their inner conflict over wanting to ring the death knell for the old dynasty as well as a wake up alarm for the current dynasty. Such explosive brush strokes embody anger, shouting, lamentation, uneasiness, frenzy—strong emotional expressions. This very feature transcended the East-West duality and corresponded with some works of abstract expressionism, portraying the angst and turmoil experienced by human civilization upon the dawn of a new dynasty. Representative Taiwanese calligraphers that engaged in modern calligraphy after the 1990s included Yeh Shihchiang (1926–2012), Hsu Yung-Chin (1951–), and Pu Tzu (1959–2013)(fig.4)²⁵. They all worked with a lexicon similar to that of modern calligraphers in Japan²⁶. There were also extremists like the mainland Chinese calligrapher Shao Yen (1962–) who, dissatisfied with the explosive strokes created by ink brushes, resorted to shooting ink with syringes to generate controversy with new types of strokes. These should all be discussed under this context.

Even though each type of calligraphic lexicon pointed towards a certain psyche, when the duplication of the lexicon becomes a symbol in itself, then its norms begin to take shape and become something that follows certain rules and can be replicated. The disconnect between form and content gradually overdraws and diminishes its artistic influence. The question we must ask then is: why have calligraphers continued to use this kind of explosive brush strokes and receive popular acclaim after half a century?

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) mentioned during his discussion of the attention-grabbing techniques used in Dadaism that “a visual representation that attracts people (or a persuasive auditory prod-

uct) goes ballistic like a bullet. It has an impact on the audience and thereby acquires a tactile quality.²⁷ ” Expecting the audience to take their time in appreciating an artwork is no longer appropriate in the age of capitalism. It has become a trend for artworks to include some type of effect to make the audience stop and look²⁸ . It is thus that explosive brush strokes have become a calligraphic lexicon reflective of the zeitgeist based on such spatio-temporary changes. Modern calligraphy faces the fact that, contrary to tradition, the upper circles of society have left aside calligraphy. Advocates of traditional calligraphy can only survive in academic institutions or scattered in society. It lacks a system for defining its value on a continuous basis. By comparison, Western classical music and pop music exist in parallel and each have their adherents²⁹ . This was made possible through the clear distinction between the academia and market ecosystems. Strangely, such distinction must be maintained between the two to make mutual exchanges possible.

In an age devoid of backing by the upper circles, calligraphers have little choice but to seek the acclaim of the masses if they want to survive. If they are sensitive enough, then they can naturally realize the importance of visual tension and explosive brush strokes in this dynasty. This goes toward explaining the enduring popularity of explosive brush strokes to some extent. The author of the such works and the general public all live in a society where calm is hard to find. Such method enables the author to vent out emotions while also catering for the aesthetic habit of excessive sensory input. (Another way of achieving market appeal is through the cuteness of cartoons and comics. This is another form of marketing that we will not go into here.) If a calligrapher wants to go beyond the explosive brush strokes that have become the creative model for this dynasty, and attempt to replace them with a new calligraphic lexicon, then he must confront the social ills of modernity. He must try to use brush and ink to heal or highlight the absurdities of the human condition in this period.

IV. Transcending the Paradox Between Revival and Innovation

Contemporary thinkers and sinologists hold their own views on calligraphy. Jean François Billeter (1939–) feels that Chinese calligraphy intrinsically contains the culture of indoctrination of imperial Confucianism³⁰ . Even his intellectual opponent François Jullien (1951–) uses brush force to explore the root causes of Chinese subservience. Regardless of whether we agree with such viewpoint, the fact is that calligraphy is intrinsically related with traditional Chinese culture. At the beginning of the 20th century, a wave of anti-traditionalism emerged in China in the fields of politics, ideology, and literature, which aimed to eliminate the relics of feudalism and old moral constraints. Perhaps it is that in an era when the West is seen as model in every aspect, the absence of anything similar in Western art enabled calligraphy to remain unscathed. The real threat to the survival of calligraphy were probably Qian Xuantong (1887–1939) and Fu Sinian (1896–1950), who advocated to abolish Chinese characters and fully phoneticize the Chinese language. Although calligraphy fortunately made it through that radical era, we also lost the opportunity to examine the relationship between calligraphy and traditional culture.

Those calligraphers of the new model-book calligraphy school mentioned previously must define the role of the classical style in the contemporary era before being able to inherit it. In other words, how to destigmatize classical forms and their spirit, finding a new meaning for them in calligraphy is a significant issue. On the other hand, those who boldly try to deconstruct the traditional system with the explosive strokes of modern calligraphy, in actuality, are letting themselves fall into aphasia while simultaneously starting a new barbaric era of calligraphy.

In the past, because of the influence of traditional art through history, which placed emphasis on epic heroes, we aimed at making a unique and outstanding achievement in calligraphy. Meanwhile, calligraphers developed various forms of experience in order to gain attain their personal extraordinariness. Therefore, when we look at the issue of “Revival” and “Innovation”, we still fall into a black-and-white issue. We rarely ask questions about what “Chinese” means or even about world culture from the viewpoint of calligraphy; and vice versa, we seldom examine calligraphic issues from the a cultural or subjective perspective. To prevent calligraphy from extinguishing in this era, we should query from more different point of view.

In order to perpetuate calligraphy, we must re-examine our preconceived knowledge structure to strip calligraphy from its many labels and truly face whatever lies behind our ideas. This paper is only a rough attempt to see through.

Notes

- 1 Lu Xun. "Ancient Books and the Vernacular" in *Volume 3, The Collected Works of Lu Xun*, Beijing: Beijing People's Literature Publishing House, 1956, p.154.
- 2 In the history of calligraphy, the most pivotal moment was the elevation of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy by Emperor Taitsung of the Tang dynasty above all others. In the Ming dynasty, the calligraphy critic Hsiang Mu even applied the idea of orthodoxy to calligraphy, with Wang Xizhi as the model individual, in his work *Elegant Words about Calligraphy*. Wang Xizhi lived during the Eastern Jin dynasty, but the concept of orthodoxy had already emerged before that time, when Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty adopted Confucianism as his state philosophy. The close relationship between orthodoxy and imperial Confucianism, the tremendous influence of Emperor Taitsung's elevation of Wang Xizhi, as well as the political connotations of model-book calligraphy during the Northern Song dynasty all led to close examination and critique of the links between Jin and Tang model-book calligraphy and imperial order by the Swiss sinologist Jean François Billeter (1939–).
- 3 Lin, Chun-Chen. *Interpretation of Zhuangzi's "The Way Goes Beyond Skill" in Chinese Calligraphy, Zhuangzhi in Transcultural Turmoil*, Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2017, pp.481–511.
- 4 Bai, Qianshen. *Fu Shan's World*, Taipei: Rock Publishing, 2005. The significance of the stele school's emergence can even be explained in the following manner: Model-book calligraphy emphasized the smoothness of writing. Writing efficiency and beauty were taken into account simultaneously, and this became closely integrated with everyday writing. Almost all of the classical works of model-book calligraphy came from everyday correspondence and essays that were mostly not intended as formal artworks. By comparison, calligraphists that embraced the stele school mainly studied epigraphs based on seal, clerical, and Wei dynasty stele scripts. Their emphasis fell more on the structure of the characters after sophistication was doubled in the Jinshi calligraphy school, strengthening expressiveness through a combination of bold and sober strokes and variations in spatial composition. It was from this perspective that they influenced the expression of semi-cursive and cursive script.
- 5 In the term *pibei*, the word *pi* originally referred to "avoiding", i.e., "staying aloof from popular trends", whereas *bei* simply meant "stele". The word *pi* can also refer to "remote", "infrequent", or even "preference", as in the term *pihao*. The first describes the object as known only to a few individuals, strange to a majority; this is the objective dimension to it. The latter indicates that the practitioner has viewpoints different from those of the majority, with a stubborn preference for certain tones; this dimension bears a stronger subjectivity. After jointly considering the above interpretations and connecting them with the purpose of "deliberate emulation", it is almost certain that people will understand *pibei* as the intention to build an individual style, connoting the purposeful act of making one's style different from others. See Lin Chun-Chen, "Discussion on Chinese Calligraphy Classics under the Light of Kang Youwei's Idea of *Pibei*", *Chinese Calligraphy*, 348th edition, 2019.

- 6 Bai Qianshen rejected the academic legitimacy of grassroots calligraphy in his essay “Commoners and the Elite.” He also wrote *Learning from the Classics and Chuan-Chuan Hair Salon* to explore this issue.
- 7 Ma Hsiao. *Grassroots Calligraphy*, China Academy of Art Press, 2002, p.28.
- 8 Source: “Appreciation of Wo Hsingwa,” Zi Media, <https://zi.media/@yidianzixun/post/XoCVgp>.
- 9 Even though Ma Hsiao did notice historical and natural factors such as wear and weathering, expressing this aspect through calligraphy would change the very nature of brush technique. Stele school practitioners such as Deng Shiru, He Shaoji, Zhao Zhiqian, Kang Youwei, Li Ruiqing, Shen Zengzhi, Yu Youren, and Lin Sanzhi have been building up experience on brush technique since the Qing dynasty. Further breakthroughs in brush technique would be difficult without such accumulated efforts. Casual and unrefined use of brush was chosen to express grassroots calligraphy. Spatial awareness and exaggerated structures were used to emphasize its novelty.
- 10 Source: “Inoue Yuichi: My Wolf Spirit from Yan Zhenqing,” kknews, <https://kknews.cc/culture/g3m284m.html>.
- 11 This principle was compiled and proposed by the philosophical adversary of grassroots calligraphy, Bai Qianshen, but is generally quite well accepted.
- 12 Qiu, Zhengzong. *Form and Expression of Calligraphy*, Beijing: China Renmin University Press, pp.121–122.
- 13 Zhang, Longxi. “Tradition: Living Culture”, *Con-Temporary Monthly*, 30th edition, pp.23–30.
- 14 Source: “Calligraphy Works of Chen Zhongkang,” kknews, <https://kknews.cc/culture/b66nkpm.html>.
- 15 Chen, Zhenlian. *History of Calligraphy in Republican China*, Shanghai, Shanghai Paintings and Calligraphy Publishing, 2017.
- 16 Zhao Mengfu has been praised and condemned throughout calligraphic history. His classic revival was characterized by elegance but lacked the spiritual expression of the Jin dynasty. It can therefore probably be categorized as more style than substance by the formal standards of Confucianism.
- 17 The brush force of Chen Zhongkang and Wang Yijun is more pronounced than that of Wang Ko, further distinguishing their personal style from classical forms.
- 18 Xiao, Wenfei. “Chen Zhongkang: Seeker of Calligraphy’s Soul,” *Chinese Painting & Calligraphy*, 2016, 4th edition, p.55.
- 19 Qiu, Zhengzong. *Wheres God Habitation - from Calligraphy History to Research Methodology*, Beijing, China Renmin University Press, 2005, p.212.
- 20 In other words, are there limitations to the analysis of visible forms? If so, do we leave out all elements that are “out-of-bounds” when we look at calligraphy works? The environmental ambiance and the brush strokes that make up the most basic form of calligraphy, as well as

variations from minute vibrations, tiny brush angles, and paper's resistance to the brush also affect our perception of the work as a whole. The content of the visible form is determined by the viewing angle, viewing distance, and environment on which we decide to stand. In that case, we can propose a very bold hypothesis. Formalist narratives based on gestalt psychology, with its emphasis on empirical evidence, may break down so-called "micro-forms" and change the angle we view calligraphy from. "Micro-form" refers to the subtle emotional or spiritual elements found in a calligraphy work, its ambiance, and other elements that can hardly be put into words. The idea enables further exploration and opens a path for *satori* by contemporary calligraphers of the new model-book calligraphy school.

- 21 The significance of reconstructing the spiritual entity is based on ethics-oriented works, *History of Sexuality* and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, written by Michel Foucault (1926–1984)—a contemporary European philosopher heavily influenced by Nietzschean thought—in his later years. The reinforcement of the ego entity or self-invention by treating the self as an artistic phenomenon go beyond the abstract opposition of Cartesianism, where the self is separated from all other beings. The implications of entity reinforcement can find correspondences with how traditional Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are chiefly preoccupied with subjects-of-a-life. Nevertheless, an examination of how the actor of contemporary calligraphy is reconstructed within the context of contemporary thinking will help contemporaries forgo their stereotypes toward tradition. New discourses can dissolve the boundaries between art and ethics so that the spirit of classicism can be reborn in a more proactive manner.
- 22 *Grand Masters of Ink—50 Years of Modern Calligraphy*, Tokyo, Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1998.
- 23 Hsiung Pingming, *Exploration on the Field of Calligraphy*, Lo Chi, ed. *Calligraphy and Contemporary Art*, Hangzhou, China Academy of Art Press, 2001, p.44.
- 24 Unagami Masaomi. *Inoue Yuichi: Calligraphy as the Art of the Masses*, Hong Kong, Joint Publishing, 2013.
- 25 Source: "Artemperor Spring Auction 2019," Artemperor, https://auctions.artemperor.tw/2019_spring/details/2060.
- 26 The Chinese Calligraphy Biennial: Tradition and Experimentation held jointly by Taiwan's Ink-Trend Association and HCS Calligraphy Foundation, and creations with a contemporary calligraphic consciousness by Tong Yang-Tze and others are outside the scope of this text. This is based on whether works above are in line with the types and forms of calligraphy emphasized and discussed in this text.
- 27 Walter, Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Trans. Chuang Chong-Li. Taipei, Business Weekly Publishing, Mar. 2019, p.54.
- 28 The emergence of such a phenomenon—quite similar to advertising in a consumer society—is linked to how people's sensory experiences are manipulated in modern consumption. Film and

music are indicators of fashion in consumer society. They reflect this evolution in the human sensory model. The increase in ratio of repetitive rhythms and melodies in pop music is like the use of montage to intensify light and sound in film. Both use stimulation and brainwashing techniques to achieve public acceptance and acclaim. Such methods blunt our senses and create a new form of barbarism. Pop culture is the product of force-feeding by the capital market. The dilution of high culture by pop culture results in dulled senses that lead to the loss and eventual disappearance of cultural sophistication. This was the proposition put forth by Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–1969)—another member of the Frankfurt School like Walter Benjamin—in his culture industry theory.

29 The idea of “in parallel” comes from *The Adjustment of Controversies*, Zhuangzi: “Therefore, the sagely man brings together a dispute in its affirmations and denials, and rests in the equal fashioning of Heaven. Both sides of the question are admissible.” In other words, it is possible for both to co-exist, and the possibility of one changing to another is retained.

30 Jean François Billeter. *The Chinese Art of Writing*. Geneva: Skira / Rizzoli; New York, 1990.