Contemporary calligraphy

leaving characters
CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY CALLIGRAPHY: LEAVING CHARACTERS

Xu Bing’s work is not calligraphy. If he thinks his work is calligraphy, then that is his own business. (...) But we have a consensus: you can play, but the bottom line is that you cannot leave Chinese characters. Once you go beyond the line, you play, but it is not calligraphy. Some people go over that line, but they still claim it is calligraphy. That is their business. (Interview 5)

Xu Bing (b. 1955), whose works have by now become the go-to example for those who want to highlight the audaciousness, the creativity and the inventiveness of contemporary Chinese art, once was – and still is – a skilled calligrapher. Growing up between books, characters and prints, with his mother working as a librarian and his father serving as the lead of the department of history at Peking University, Xu Bing’s fascination with script started early on (Guile 2009, 55). “I love using the written word to create works of art”, Xu Bing declared in an essay (Erickson 2001, 13).

I start this chapter with contemporary artist and calligrapher Xu Bing, because the subtle juxtaposition he poses serves as a good point of entry to the questions this chapter investigates. Instead of saying that the written word is art, Xu Bing argues it might be opposed to art – the written word functions as a tool that can be employed to create what might be considered “art”. He speaks out more clearly here:

It might be said that I had such a skill, yet in my mind I have never truly created calligraphy, because my earliest experience with the brush – the tracing of red characters and the copying of classical stelae – was not calligraphy: it was simply writing characters. To be precise: it was a method of cultural conditioning and a rite of cultural passage. I never thought of it as art. (Xu, 2001, 16)

Xu Bing’s point of view is an example of the many debates on the intersections, overlaps and contradictions vis-à-vis craft, art, writing and calligraphy that have been around as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), as explained in the introduction. The difficult position of
calligraphy in the present-day follows, along with other factors, its synchronicity with a relatively new phenomenon called *contemporary art*. Both calligraphy and contemporary Chinese art today struggle with a complicated position: the status of calligraphy as an independent art form – in the sense that it is both researched as an academic subject and evaluated and exhibited in designated calligraphy art expositions – is less than forty years old, and continues to be ill-defined. At the same time, the conceptual frameworks to demarcate the spaces inhabited by Chinese contemporary art are still subject to debate as well (M. Gao 2011, 4). Matters have become even more unclear around the 1980s, when the two met in an artistic juncture.

Scholarship on Chinese contemporary art has attempted to define this juncture with imprecise terms such as: “calligraphic expression as a new artistic language” (Wiseman Bittner and Liu 2011, XXIV) and “combining calligraphic imagery and techniques with the modern forms of conceptual and performance art” (Barrass 2002, 29). Gao Minglu, one of the most prominent art critics in mainland China refers to this moment as “an investigation of language as part of the idea art (*guannian yishu* 观念艺术)” (2011, 219), and Xu Jiang concludes that these developments “use writing as shock tactics (...), intent only on extreme conceptualism, decoration, even at times treating calligraphy as a minor of video art” (in Xu and Wang 2005, 9).

A good example of a work that is located in that position is *Book of the Sky* (*tianshu* 天书, see figure 19), the woodblock art installation made by Xu Bing,. During the advent of the avant-garde art scene in China around the 1980s, coined by Gao Minglu as the “’85 New Wave Art Movement” (1999), this piece became the defining artwork of the movement – and not much later also the focal point of governmental critique (Erickson 2001, 40). *Book of the Sky* is an impressive work for which the artist has spent four years designing and carving out thousands of Song-type woodblock characters, and printing them on volumes of books, scrolls and one enormous hanging scroll. Together, these pieces make up a monumental art installation, initially named *Mirror to Analyze the World: The Century’s Final Volume* (*Xi shijian shijimo juan* 析世鉴-世纪末卷), but collectively known as *Book of the Sky*. The text appears to be perfectly legible, but instead of real characters, the graphs made by Xu Bing are all
deliberately illegible – they do not exist in the lexicon of the Chinese language. The work upsets conventions of writing, and forces the viewer to reassess their relationship with language and script – a configuration in which language is made meaningless and fake was, and is, to many offensive, disturbing and unsettling.

To make sense of the installation, a large body of scholarly work has been produced since its inception, probing the artwork from many angles. Harrist notes that “allied forces of art history and sinology could establish a comfortable niche for Xu Bing’s now world-famous nonsense characters by ferreting out influences, precedents, parallels or prefigurations from the history of calligraphy and printing” (2006, 25), while Erickson adds that “the work’s tantalizingly elusive meaning fuels the debate, provoking both scholars and students of art to pull out all their methodological tools as they seek to plumb its depths. We can turn to the giants – Barthes, Derrida, Foucault – but nothing quite does the trick” (Erickson 2001, 33).

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When I visited his studio in Beijing in 2016, Xu Bing spoke about new artistic and linguistic expressions that should always be made in accordance with the needs of the time:

Most people consider artists as geniuses. But I realized that IQ is not the most important thing for artists. The most important thing is whether you can absorb the energy of society, and transfer it into new expressive ways of art and language. I feel that this ability is the most important. I must always keep myself alive and creative, and this motivation must come from the attention to my societal surroundings. (Interview 7)

This makes every artwork, he argues, a reflection or translation of its time, echoing Baudelaire’s credo of the western modernist movement *Il faut être de son temps* (“you must be of your time”).

This is the main issue of this chapter: how to be of your time, when you make something that is supposed to be similar to works made more than a thousand years ago – or is it no longer supposed to be so? *Book of the Sky* and its context within the emerging art movement of the ‘85 New Wave serve as starting points to explore art works located at a meeting point between Chinese contemporary art and calligraphy, and examine the visual objects that are located at these edges, as well as their makers: what is being made within the frameworks of “contemporary calligraphy”, and what is excluded from that framework? How should we position this discourse in relation to the traditional calligraphy taught in the disciplinary classroom, and the vernacular water calligraphy made in the public park? Should we read the aesthetic alterations in these works as dissent, as a critique of traditional calligraphy, or is contemporary calligraphy art actually not the locus of criticality that it is often made out to be by historians and art scholars?

Birgit Hopfener observes that in the discourse of contemporary art, “there seems to be a dominant view that a commitment of art to criticality is obligatory” (2012, 194). This is especially the case for non-western artistic production. In the case of China, the freedom to create art was demanded by the Stars group, demonstrating in the streets of Beijing in 1979. This foundational avant-garde movement adopted western style modern art to demand new liberties, and this style allowed the artists to distance themselves from the style of Socialist Realism mandatory until then. Hsingyuan Tsao argues that by then, “the term ‘avant-garde’ had become something of a comical concept in the west, leaving the Chinese contemporary
art movement as the last real avant-garde” (Tsao and Ames 2011, 8). This still rings true, as the arts remain, to varying degrees, under control of the government in China. Chinese contemporary art, thus, seems to be burdened with an expectation to dissent because it might still be relevant “there”.

It begs the question what these critiques, if they are there, should be aimed at: the inherited visual tradition, or the tight official control of the arts? Or more widely, since calligraphy is so tied up with politics, the general positions of the government? Making changes to the written character almost instantly implies critique, geared not only at writing, but at the culture in which writing is embedded. Rey Chow argues that Chinese script is a contested terrain of political power: “Chinese writing is realpolitik, a struggle in which those who hold state power still have the authority to restrain and suppress—to mark, to write off—whoever dares challenge them” (2002, 67,68), and Xu Bing argues similarly: “To strike at the written word, is to strike at the very essence of the culture” (Xu in Erickson, 2001,14).

Calligraphy, with its in-betweenness of word and image seems to function as a double-edged sword, and tampering with it – either transforming them into unreadable signs, blending them with other art forms or employing unusual tools to write them – seemingly renders it an ideal vehicle for critique. Yet, I refrain from the familiar pitfall to see Chinese contemporary art objects as inherently critical, and instead, I aim to let the objects in this chapter speak for themselves. I follow art critic Manyi Pei in this respect, who, when talking about Chinese contemporary calligraphy, argues: “It allows for a more reliable and rigorous academic discussion to let the artworks speak” (2018).

In analyzing how art critics (as Silbergeld [2006] reminds us, for the artist, “those in power” include critics and art historians – aesthetic colonizers) interpret the artworks made by contemporary calligraphers and contemporary artists employing calligraphy, it is noticeable how often their interpretation is framed in negative prefixes – to underscore, it seems, that what is happening, undoes something very important. Yang Chengyin, for example, wrote that Book of the Sky is “anti-art, anti-traditional” (in Erickson 2001, 41). Wang Nanming referred to it as “anti-calligraphy” (Wang Nanming 1994 in Adriana Iezzi 2013, 167) while Liu labels the contemporary artworks that engage with calligraphy as “counter-calligraphy” and “creative efforts to bring neo-Chineseness to life” (in Wiseman Bittner and Liu 2011, 92) and de Kloet proposes “strategic unmeaning” to describe Book of the Sky (2007, 41).
Considering that these artworks have generally been framed as being anti-, non-, or counter-, this chapter analyses how they coexist with the traditional calligraphy scene. By definition, their makers place their works outside of the traditional calligraphy paradigm, but how – both in theoretical conception and execution – are they indebted to traditional calligraphy, and how do they talk back to, interact with, and view each other? It is important to realize that the contemporary art calligraphy scene currently coexists with what at least appears to be its target of critique. Wu Hung has suggested that contemporary calligraphy might not be motivated by the wish to critique traditional calligraphy at all, but actually attempts to elevate its artistic component: “by subtly suppressing the content of a handwritten text a writer can emphasize the aesthetic value of his brushwork” (Wu 2005, 39). In other words, Wu argues that by consciously taking away the literary content of the characters, these works become pure calligraphic works, “leaving form as a sole signifier of meaning” (Wu 2005, 39). Following Wu Hung’s reasoning, I ask what is to be gained from freeing the calligraphic form from the apparent burden of legibility, and what subtle artistic interventions can be found in the broad spectrum from critique to reverence.

These questions, on the inclusion and exclusion of different types of calligraphy, critique and politics are inspired by the theory of Jacques Rancière on the “aesthetic regime” (2004). For Rancière, human practices are ordered in a more or less structured way that is aimed at maintaining configurations of power. This is done by setting clear boundaries, delimiting what is made visible and invisible, made audible and inaudible, made possible and impossible. Rancière calls this the “police order”. This police order is “a symbolic constitution of the social”. It is a generally implicit law, and its essence does not lie in repression or control, but in the way it “divides up the sensible” (Rancière 2015, 36). The endeavor of the police order is to define and distribute what, and who, is allowed to speak and be heard, and what is ultimately possible and impossible. Rancière calls this endeavor “the distribution of the sensible”, where after he continues that through artistic practices, an intervention or disruption in these distributions can take place. Artistic practices, according to Rancière, “are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (2004, 46). In other words, aesthetics can make visible what had been invisible; audible what was not to be heard and make possible what was impossible in an earlier configuration. It has the power to change patterns of behavior and is therefore political.
Rancière’s ideas are similar to the earlier defamiliarization paradigm that was put forward by Viktor Shklovsky in 1917. Shklovsky argued that art is a technique that carries the ability to make objects “unfamiliar”, as “art removes objects from the automatism of perception” (in Berlina 2016). As such, it creates a special perception of the object. Shklovsky maintains that an artistic object has a potential to unsettle, and to shift the perception. What Rancière inserts in this debate, is a specific emphasis on forms of sensory experience: the visible, the audible, and the sensible. This intervention allows for an analysis of the ways in which the works of contemporary calligraphy selected for this chapter unsettle modes of perception, and simultaneously construct and deconstruct patterns of what calligraphy should do or should be. Rancière’s focus on the sensible is pertinent in the discussion of new forms of calligraphy, as they introduce new visual, tactile, and in some occasions even gustatory and olfactory practices to an art form that for centuries has been imagined as made with black ink, rice paper and brush.

Three artists whose works play with configurations of calligraphy have been selected for this chapter. I choose three artists that each maintain a unique position vis-à-vis calligraphy, allowing us to analyze the scene from three distinctive angles: (1) Wang Dongling is seen as one of the founders of the contemporary calligraphy scene. His status has become almost sacrosanct, and he speaks from the position of an established innovator; (2) Zeng Xiang operates from the position of a traditional calligrapher who experiments with bold new forms, and is heavily criticized for it, and (3) Qiu Zhijie speaks from the position of a contemporary Chinese artist who employs conceptual enactments of calligraphy in his work.

While these three artists thus offer three distinct perspectives, I selected works of each of them that are similar in medium, and remain close to the traditional calligraphic mold: the works are all made with ink, paper and brush. My reason for selecting these three artists is, apart from the variety it offers in analytical perspective, also based on experiences during fieldwork: their works were debated and compared during interviews; talked about and sometimes fiercely discussed in WeChat groups and at educational institutes; rendering a study of their works relevant for the current calligraphy scene at large. Moreover, I believe it is crucial for this study to approach this scene as an open field, and not be hindered by preconceived markers of either “calligrapher” or “artist”. How useful is it to distinguish between a contemporary artist who employs calligraphy as a conceptual tool, or reversely, a calligrapher who employs contemporary art as a conceptual tool? Again, I believe there is
more to gain from a careful analysis of the artistic object, and scrutinize from there how and
why these were realized by their makers. Wang Dongling notes in this respect, that for him
these boundaries are indeed permeable: “I am making calligraphy a category of contemporary
art” (Interview 38).

Wang Dongling (b. 1945) who has become the most renowned living calligrapher in
China today, stems from a long lineage of well-known traditional calligraphers. From that
position, Wang set out to create a new paradigm for calligraphy in the contemporary, and has
not only produced innovative works, but also has written extensively on the new directions
that contemporary calligraphy should take, thus simultaneously creating and demarcating the
field. The aesthetics of his works have unsettled, confused, and in a Rancière-ian way
redistributed the senses in China’s calligraphy scene, as well as abroad. As I will show, he is
not concerned with overthrowing or critiquing calligraphy, but aims to redirect its focus and
purpose to secure its longevity. I will look specifically at his by now signature style of large-
scale wild cursive calligraphy (jiufu dazi shufa 巨幅大字书法) performed live in front of an
audience, and his own invented style that he calls “chaos script” (luanshu 乱书).

Second, I look at four works made by contemporary calligrapher Zeng Xiang (b. 1958).
He caused a stir in his latest show at the Art District 798 in Beijing in April 2018 when he
showcased his large and highly expressive works, together with a video of himself making
these artworks: writing with a brush as large as a mop on a large piece of paper that was laid
out on the floor, moving his entire body ferociously while screaming and splashing around ink.
Not well known in the west, in calligraphy scenes Zeng Xiang is often mentioned as one of the
frontrunners of a contemporary calligraphic category called “ugly calligraphy” (choushu 丑书),
a category in which Wang Dongling is only occasionally classified as well. While some use the
term derogatorily, others claim that these works, although maverick, are a necessity for
calligraphy in the modern age, and highlight its creative and innovative potential.

Third, artist and academic Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969) works with an eclectic array of artistic
media: ink, photography, installation, sculpture and performance art. Many of his better-
known works translate traditional artistic techniques into conceptual pieces, leaving it to the
viewer to decide whether this should be seen as a positioning against tradition, or in line with
that tradition. The primary concerns in his works revolve around themes of language, time,
repetition and disappearance; often employing calligraphy as a conceptual instrument. For
this chapter, I will look specifically at his *Copying the Preface of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion a Thousand Times* (1990-1995). This is a photographic documentation in which the artist copies Wang Xizhi’s famous piece of calligraphy (which is in itself a copy of the original) a thousand times on the same sheet of paper for over a period of five years, rendering the classic text pitch black and indecipherable.

I approach the works of these three artists as part of a longer lineage of artists who started to obfuscate the lines between calligraphy and contemporary art since the beginning of the 1980s. They in turn are indebted to their predecessors of the New Culture Movement, which took place around the mid-1910s and 1920s, and fundamentally influenced the intellectual and cultural discourses of society. In what follows, I will lay out the societal and political backgrounds that led to the emergence of calligraphic modern artworks, to then move on to an object analysis of the three-abovementioned artists and a selection of their works.

“A PLEASURE GROUND FOR SCRIPT, A PARADISE FOR FREE IMAGINATION”

Earlier in the introduction, I suggested that the emergence of calligraphic modern artworks should be located before the ’85 Movement and the New Culture Movement, and started earlier in the Qing dynasty with the Stele school (*Beixue pai* 碑学派). Here, I continue with the second debate on “modern calligraphy” that took place in the mid-1980s, and coincided with larger governmental liberal reforms that brought a renewed interest in western philosophy, aesthetics, and psychology, largely fueled by translations of these works that now became widely available.

Gu Gan, a former traditional calligrapher and printmaker during the Cultural Revolution, became the frontrunner of the Modernist Movement (*shufa xiandaipai* 书法现代派) after organizing the First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa shouzhan* 中国现代书法首展) in 1985. In 1990, he wrote the highly influential *The three steps of Modern Calligraphy* (*Xiandai Shufa de Sanbu* 现代书法的三步), in which he argued that the fundamental goal of modern calligraphy should be providing enjoyment and pleasure for

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46 Gu Gan 1992, 52.
the eye, that is at the same time “linked to an idea”. He prefers this over following the path of traditional calligraphy that he considers too self-confining to achieve freedom as an artist, and is overly focused on text (Gu 1990). In this, he is echoing the earlier Zhang Yinlin in 1931, quoted in the introduction.

The beginnings of that “movement”, as Gu Gan recalls in 1992, where all but clearly defined:

Our group from the first Modern Calligraphy Exhibition was really not clear-headed at all. It is just that we wanted to differentiate a bit from the same old grass, clerical and seal scripts that we could see everywhere. But I would have never thought that the exhibition would ignite such a strong reaction from the public. When that happened I, only still half awake, started to ask myself: What is this all about? (1992, 52)

His confusion then turned into excitement, prompting him to state that “Modern calligraphy is a pleasure ground for script, a paradise for free imagination” (1992, 53). Gu Gan experienced this time as a period in which one was allowed to play around freely, with a cheerful difference of opinion on where to take these new shapes and forms, arguing that the different voices in modern calligraphy should never agree, or else it would mean the end of modern calligraphy as a whole. He reiterates the same statement in an opinion piece in 2016 (Gu 2016; Gu 1990). And indeed, in the time that has passed between Gu Gan’s almost identical declarations in 1992 and 2016, exactly that has happened: a common agreement on what modern calligraphy defines has not been found, and also, the debate is still alive. While bold experimentations took place, inevitably, it was not all considered calligraphy, but often seen as a transitional concept, that, if anything, negates traditional calligraphy (N. Wang 1994, 12). Xu Jiang positions the different opinions on a spectrum, in which the traditionalists are at the one end, where they “adhere so loyally to the past that they fail to evolve either styles of their own or push forward new frontiers within their art.” This conservatism, he argues, overlooks the “essential exploratory spirit of calligraphy as an ever-evolving art form that can be as boldly experimental and as innovative as any other”. At the other end of the spectrum, he places those who abandon all tradition in favor of change for its own sake, and deconstruct Chinese characters without regard for their meaning (in Xu and Wang 2005, 9).

The attempts that have been made – and are still being made – to classify and
categorize all the different rhizomatic, unstable and ever-changing offshoots and imaginations of calligraphy since the first exhibition in 1985 – by art critics who are often also calligraphers themselves⁴⁷ – are therefore not univocal. Zhu Qingsheng for example proposes to divide the artworks in thirteen different schools⁴⁸, while Gao Tianming differentiates five schools (in lezzi 2015, 210). Zhang Aiguo suggests eight types of calligraphy and Liu Zhongcao proposes six types of style⁴⁹ (in Y.Wang 2013). In western scholarship, a distinction made by Barrass into Classicism, Neoclassicism, Modernism, and Avant-garde is most often maintained (Barrass 2002; see also lezzi 2013, 2015). I should emphasize here that this study purposely does not align to any kind of classification. Being aware of these classifications, however, does allow me to embed the analysis in the context of the modern calligraphy movement, and helps us in appreciating how complicated it was, and is, to find a common agreement on the subject.

Theorists on these new calligraphic constructs focused their analysis first on the nature of the works, specifically on how the artworks experiment with the legibility of the written character. These experiments are done in various ways, either by a distortion of form and space, such as stretching it in size (for example in the works of Gu Gan, Yang Jin Song), dissecting the characters as single brushstrokes (for example in the work of Qiu Zhenzhong), using newly discovered archaic script types (for example in the works of Zou Tao, Zhang Aiguo) and rediscovering the ancient structure and visual symbolism with regards to nature, and its pictorial backgrounds (for example in the work of Wei Ligang, Xu Bing, Qiu Zhenzhong, Zeng Xiang). Another category of works sets out to create a complete erasure of lexicalized meaning through creating Chinese looking characters, that are not readable as they do not exist in the lexicon (for example Xu Bing, Gu Wenda). From here, artists started to leave rice

⁴⁷ That this situation might lead to conflicts of interest is evident, and is showcased for example in the polemic article of Wang Nanming in 2017 where he attacks fellow modern calligraphy pioneer Qiu Zhenzhong for selecting the list of calligraphers as well as participating in the 2000 Chengdu exhibition “Gate of the Century”. Wang states: “Qiu Zhenzhong shamelessly said to me: ‘because the formation of “modern calligraphy” is related to me, I am of course qualified to participate’” (N. Wang 2017).

⁴⁸ Zhu Qingsheng proposes the following division: the character-painting school (zihuapai 字画派), dynamic movement school (dongshipai 动势派), geometric school (jihepai 几何派), production school (zhizuopai 制作派), behavior school (xingweipai 行为派), brush intention school (maoyipai 笔意派), ink appearance school (moxiangpai 墨象派), word meaning school (ciyipai 词意派), non-character school (feizipai 非字派), non-surface school (feifupai 非幅派), non-writing school (feifupai 非写派) and the non-human school (feirenpai 非人派).

⁴⁹ A comprehensive overview of these classifications has been made by lezzi in 2013 and 2015.
paper as their main surface of writing, and began to venture towards creating calligraphies on a wide range of surfaces: on photographs, newspapers and bamboo (for example Wang Dongling), with leftover foods (by the Yangjiang Group), written directly on human bodies (for example Zhang Huan) or animals (Xu Bing), on rocks and stone (Lis Jung Lu, Song Dong, Qiu Zhijie), or on walls (for example Lu Da Dong and the King of Kowloon). In yet another reincarnation, the artists leave the concept of writing surfaces altogether, and interpret calligraphy as dance (Guangdong Modern Dance Company) or as a videogame or installation (Feng Mengbo).

Two major artistic currents have been, and continue to be, especially important sources of inspiration: Abstract Expressionism of the New York School and Japanese modern calligraphy. Abstract Expressionism was a movement that developed in New York around 1940, and was committed to art as expressions of the self rather than its object. Their attempt, according to art collector Eugene Thaw, was to be non-political and non-ideological, and their commitment to total freedom of expression was the extent of their political position (1987, 23). Many of the traits of these works we find translated in works of contemporary Chinese calligraphy – the Abstract Expressionists valued immediacy, and their non-representational framework of expressive shapes and lines made the act of painting a dynamic means of expression. Its influence on the Chinese modern calligraphy movement should be seen as a three-way entangled exchange, as Abstract Expressionism in itself was indebted to Japanese calligraphy, which in turn is entangled with traditional Chinese calligraphy (Y. Wang 2013, 183). Antoni Tàpies, an influential artist of the movement, commented: “We, especially the artists grown up with the Abstract Expressionist school, owe so much to the Chinese calligraphers that we understand the emotional language of using the skills of the brush” (in Gu 1990, 126).

Japanese calligraphy, or sho, had been relocated from the category of art to that of “crafts” during the modernization processes of the Meiji Restoration (1868 CE), when a group of innovators called the bokujinkai (Group of People of Ink) artists, set out to develop a new

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50 Author’s intent aside, this did not mean that their works were always a-political. Eva Cockcroft argues for example that their works were appropriated by government agencies as a vehicle for Cold War propaganda (1974).

51 In reply, Gu notes that the lines and the vigor in the strokes of for example the works of Kline and Miro are very similar to calligraphy, and studying a sculpture of Henry Moore, he asks: “Shall we take in this way of creation to design Chinese characters – the reformation of line and space?” (Gu 1990, 129)
vision for Japanese calligraphy, in order to, as Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer argues, “protect their territory on the international modern art map” (2015, 118). They created daring experiments with legibility to the extent of complete abstractionism. One of their major concerns was the quality of the brush line: is it a “painterly line” or a “calligraphic line”, and what are the theoretic delimitations of these distinctions?

After the Reform and Opening up of China, modern calligraphers raised similar questions and were now, too, making calligraphy that could be free of form and free of writing, as a way to emphasize emotion on the calligraphic line. The body as a tool plays a significant role in the execution of this modern calligraphy. Where the imposing gestures and brush strokes, the dripping paint and the large canvases of the western expressionists were inspired by their previous mural making in the Great Depression of the 1930s, the modern calligraphers’ large scripts are redolent of their lived realities of dazibao writing during the Cultural Revolution. An example of that is the work of Wang Dongling.

WANG DONGLING – EMOTION IN THE CALLIGRAPHIC LINE

Calligraphy really is an incredible art form. (...) First it was enough that some old men just wrote for themselves, but now, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, calligraphy has entered the art academies and art education. Now that has happened, we need to dig deeper to find its artistic nature. Because the essence of art is creation (chuangzuo 创作), artists should express their views and emotions. (Interview 38)

Wang Dongling speaks softly with a discernible southern accent when I visit him in his hometown Hangzhou. Having exhibited in the British Museum, the Art Academy of Rome and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to name a few, and as the only artist to have been granted three solo shows at the National Art Museum of China, Wang Dongling has made a name for himself as one of the most daring and important contemporary calligraphers of today, and is well-known both inside and outside of China. Wang belonged to the first group of five students to receive a calligraphy diploma from Zhejiang University in 1981. As the teacher of the first calligraphy class for foreign students, and as a result of an appointment as visiting professor of calligraphy in the United States from 1988 to 1992, Wang Dongling has
been influenced and motivated by a number of western painters, including Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, as well as his own calligraphy instructors such as Lin Sanzhi (Hertel 2016, 11). Wang Dongling became convinced that calligraphy had to become acknowledged as a fully independent art form, one that is also understandable for people who “cannot enter calligraphy, because of Chinese characters” (interview 38), and has set out to liberate the calligraphic stroke from meaning; making calligraphy an art form that is approachable for everyone. He has created large works with single characters, polychrome calligraphy – writing on colored paper or using colorants instead of ink –, he has written on bamboo-canies, on photography of female nudes and on glass plates. Many of the works clearly take inspiration from Abstract Expressionism. Yet, Wang Dongling’s brush lines remain recognizably calligraphic, as I will show.

During my fieldwork in Beijing and Hangzhou, not one conversation with professionally engaged calligraphers or students of calligraphy left Wang Dongling and his work unmentioned – despite his experimentation, he was univocally considered a true calligrapher. Jiao, a student of calligraphy at the Renmin University in Beijing, notes for example:

What Wang Dongling tries to express is still calligraphy. His traditional lines, the feeling he gives people through brush and ink; that is important to him. It doesn’t matter if he writes on bamboo, or with a mop on the floor, he still wants to express the essence of brush and ink. Brush, ink and the line, these things together, that is his way of working. And the feeling it generates; these are still matters of calligraphy. (Interview 12)

Wang seems to have set the standards and boundaries of what constitutes modern calligraphy, and the harsh polemics that a calligrapher such as Zeng Xiang receives, as we will see in the next section, are much less prevalent. To the contrary, the rave reviews he receives often extend to admiration for his moral character Mai Jia writes for example: “He only follows his heart. And this to be sure, is one strong, independent heart” (in Xu 2011, 22). Si Shunwei notes: “Through Wang’s prolific works, I am very much impressed by Mr. Wang’s glamour as a leading contemporary calligrapher!” (in Xu 2011, 32)

Such praise raises the question why Wang Dongling in particular is so popular today. I propose two readings, the one dovetailing the other. The first reading relates to his background as a former apprentice of Lin Sanzhi (1898-1989) – an eminent calligrapher who has been referred to as “the man with the iron line” and “the Sage of Cursive Calligraphy” (Barrass 2002, 140, 143). Lin Sanzhi’s ideas on creativity have, according to Barass, deeply influenced the inception of a new and modern calligraphy movement (2002, 164). Lin is in turn the student of renowned brush-and-ink artist Huang Binhong (1865-1955) (Hertel 2017, 258). Wang is thus part of a lineage of established and revered calligraphers, which allows him a safe position, as well as the artistic baggage, from where to experiment. Lin Sanzhi’s radical views on creativity, tradition and innovation where mostly informed by a dislike for insincere endeavors of the new, regarding them fake and pretentious (Hertel 2017, 274). Wang Dongling, in a similar vein, reiterates how innovation is necessary, but should always be grounded in a careful and sincere negotiation with traditional calligraphy:

Since the creative conditions of the calligrapher have changed, the essence of calligraphy must transform accordingly. Traditional calligraphy emphasizes spiritual pastime and symbolizes the self, and contemporary calligraphy values self-directedness and the performance of art (...). The inner force of the creativity of contemporary calligraphy, is preserving the specific intrinsic spirit of calligraphy, and yet make it have an essential effect on the condition of today’s mainstream culture (2007, 10-11).

This leads to the second reading: scrutinizing his works, we notice how they are invested, similar to the famous and recognizable works of Lin Sanzhi, in preserving a cursive calligraphic line. His unusual execution of these lines, however, unsettles, and redistributes in a Rancièrean way the senses, through different tactics: introducing live spectacle,

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53 When famous writer, calligrapher and Minister of Culture Guo Moruo saw the works of Lin, Guo claimed that it was the best work he had seen in three centuries, and Lin became immediately famous. Lin, who wrote expressive and elegant cursive script, burnt his hand in boiling water fusing his three fingers together. After that, his calligraphy was no longer flowing and elegant, but his lines became thin and long, brushed on with raw and dryish ink. Barrass describes how these lines were interpreted as “taunted with energy”, because it reflected the inner strength and iron will of Lin, who despite his misfortunes persevered in his writing (Barrass 2002, 140). We recognize traces of characteristics of Lin’s writing in this period in the work of his pupil Wang Dongling as well, which shows not only how notions of creativity and innovation are very much informed and shaped by the arbitrary occurrences in the everyday, but also how this can be transmitted through copying.
employing techniques of performance, change in reading direction and a different use of the body. This is, according to Wang, “what the 21st century needs” (2015, 7).

I look at his large-scale calligraphy (*jufu dazi shufa* 巨幅大字书法), by now a signature style, performed live in front of an audience, and his “chaos script” (*luanshu* 乱书) style that developed from there, which is, according to Wang, the final culmination of his wild cursive script. Wang has been writing large-scale calligraphy since 1987 (in He 2018), often performed live in front of an audience and displayed in various places, but perhaps most remarkable on the giant flagship Apple store in Hangzhou in 2015 (see figure 20). He wrote a well-known poem on the West Lake in Hangzhou by Song poet Su Dongpo (1036-1101)\(^{54}\) in large cursive calligraphy, covering the entire front of the building.\(^{55}\) The video released by Apple shows the exterior of the Apple store: an immense modern building presented in awe-inspiring angle, standing out from the surrounding traditional roofs and covered in Wang’s bold calligraphy. The video parallels the old, rich history of China symbolized by calligraphy with an exciting new future as the voice-over states: “The work he created celebrates the rich history of art and culture in Hangzhou and the exciting future the new Apple store will be part of.” Wang’s larger than life characters are supposed to symbolize traditional art as a thought-provoking antidote to the modernity symbolized by the Apple store, but in fact, little is traditional about his calligraphy.

The contemporaneity of his characters is evident in three distinguishing ways. First, Wang employs his entire body and movement to create meandering lines, walking over a paper that is laid out on the floor as one can see in the video (see footnote 52). In this way, he reinterprets calligraphy as a physically dynamic art. The expressive power of the technique itself becomes evident through his body movements. As suggested in the introduction, Wang’s physical movements can be interpreted as inspired by the *dazibao* movement, in which Wang took part. This background can be helpful in understanding how Wang Dongling developed the inspiration to write large script. Writing large and public in *cursive style*, however, was strictly prohibited during the *dazibao* movement as it was deemed too

\(^{54}\) The poem is “Drinking by the Lake: Clear Sky at First, then Rain” (*Yin hushang chu qing hou yu* 饮湖上初晴后雨).

\(^{55}\) Wang wrote on paper laid out on the floor. The piece has been enlarged and transferred to the building. The video of this event was published online on 22 January-2015.  
expressive and bourgeois. Wang’s embodied public writing in large cursive style today, can thus be seen as both liberating and emotionally charged.

Second, the exhibition space where Wang prefers people to be part of the spectacle by watching while he writes (in the case of the work for Apple, the performance was videotaped), changes the visual perception of the work: the audience resonates with the piece as it unfolds in front of them, which simultaneously emphasizes individual performance. Performative calligraphy is not uncommon, nor a new invention. Political figures are often asked to wield their brushes in front of a large audience to grace an event, and calligraphers asked to write the head masts of shops or buildings often do so in public. Kraus notes that “when you are holding the brush, you are onstage” (1991, 57). Wang’s intervention in this tradition, is that he develops a deliberate performative setting: he is not asked to grace an event, but he creates his own performance, in a designated art-space.

The third contemporary feature of Wang’s large cursive style relates to this public visibility. Wang’s work travels all over the world – performing in public spaces such as museums, schools, halls, and, evidently, he even lends his brush for the promotion of Apple, of which he unassumingly declares in our interview: “I just like Apple, I use their products

Figure 20: Wang Dongling. 2015. *Drinking by the Lake: Clear Sky at First, then Rain*. Retrieved as snapshot from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MAsPtCNMTI
too”. This is part of Wang’s larger strategy and often reiterated conviction that calligraphy should be displayed to the rest of the world, in order to keep it alive and relevant (D. Wang 2015). Performance of calligraphic art can transcend national boundaries giving the art form cross-cultural relevance.

The distinct calligraphic line is now paramount: while the performative spectacle renders Wang’s pieces attractive for an international audience – allowing those who cannot read the characters to still be moved by the works, these lines ensure that the piece remains calligraphic. Looking at the brush lines on the Apple building, we can infer that they are unmistakably informed by traditional calligraphic technique. They are made up of raw and dryish ink lines: white spaces remain within the black stroke because of this dryness. This is referred to as flying white (feibai 飛白) in calligraphic discourse. The characters are not linked together and are relatively similar in size, written vertically in columns. The brush moves from angular strokes – the “reverse-tip stroke” (nifeng xiabi 逆风下筆, when you begin a stroke with the tip of the brush in the opposite direction) to hair-thin connecting lines, and it jumps up and down in unlikely sharp angular bends. The lines reveal that Wang used the technique of the hidden brush tip (cangfeng 藏锋) and the exposed tip (lufeng 露锋). The long meandering, almost hesitant lines that give this work liveliness and playfulness are referred to as “lingering” (liu 留) in calligraphy jargon and are often seen in Wang’s work. These lingering lines are clearly influenced by his master Lin Sanzhi, as Hertel has demonstrated (2017, 102), and Wang’s calligraphy thus builds on earlier experiments with cursive script.

Wang Dongling pushes the idea of the charged calligraphic line to the extreme in his newly invented “chaos script” (luanshu 乱书), a type of calligraphy that plays with the notion of the legible: “This will shock the world”, Wang claims, “with its groundbreaking features” (in He 2018). This chaos script, also often performed in front of an audience, looks, indeed, chaotic, and breaks with almost every convention of calligraphy. Figure 21 is an example: one can see, first, from the title of the work that this is a rendering of a canonical poem by Li Bai. In good traditional parlance, Wang thus copies a familiar poem. But then, all guidance ceases.

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56 The conflation of commercial purposes and art might seem unusual, but like Wang Dongling embraces the opportunity to widen the scale and scope of calligraphy, contemporary calligrapher Gu Gan was also aided by commodification to show calligraphy to the world – he was asked to design the wine label for the 1996 Chateau Mouton Rothschild by the famous wine house Rothschild.
On the large surface of paper, calligraphic lines, bends, dots and strokes are jotted together in an amorphous jumble. The writing and reading orders are subverted entirely, and there is no beginning, and no end to the piece. While Wang claims to have written a well-known poem, the chaotic discrepancy between reading and seeing confuses the senses. When trying to discern separate characters – in an attempt to make sense of the work as a legible calligraphic piece – the viewer is pulled into an almost musical rhythm, with its alternation of black and white and jumping dots and lines. The work thus simultaneously carries the power to alienate the viewer who is used to looking at calligraphic works, and to absorb those accustomed to seeing works of abstract expressionist art – here Rancière’s redistribution of the sensible is an appropriate theoretical tool to understand this artistic intervention.

The only thing that remains in his chaos script, is the discernible calligraphic line. These lines, in which we find remnants of those which Wang copied, lift the work into the realm of calligraphy. Wang notes decidedly: “The lines I draw cannot be written without the skill I attained in thirty or even fifty years. I maintain my writing skill as a calligrapher” (in He 2018).

This is an important observation towards understanding the field of contemporary calligraphy: deviation from the norm can now be done in many different, and creative ways. Yet, it is clear that this should be done with deference to the foundations of calligraphy. These foundations should be discernible – even if very subtly – through the contemporary work in order to maintain legitimate as a respectable innovator. We might, at this point, recall the students in chapter one, whose motivation to go to calligraphy class (partly) lies in the widespread idea that one’s handwriting reflects the (moral) character, embodied in the phrase 字如其人 (zi ru qi ren). Is this ancient belief so easily abandoned by Wang Dongling? It is not, he tells me in our interview:

Next time, you should see my studio, it is quite chaotic. It is the studio of an artist making chaotic script (...) Calligraphy reflects personality at the deepest level. (Interview 38)

In the next section, we encounter Zeng Xiang, who works with similar contentions, but whose status is less acknowledged than that of Wang Dongling.

ZENG XIANG – (NOT) BEING UGLY

They despise tradition, despise classics, and despise authority (F. Wang 2004, 14)

When I am walking around in Art District 798 in Beijing on a particularly stuffy day in April 2018, looking for the gallery where the exhibition of Zeng Xiang (b. 1958) is located, strange noises draw me closer to a gallery. I hear someone screaming at the top of his lungs, and, reluctantly, step inside. There, I see a tastefully set-up exhibition, featuring a large TV screen in the left corner of the room that shows Zeng Xiang while he is making the artworks on display left and right from the screen: he moves his entire body ferociously, while screaming and splashing around ink on paper laid out on the floor, sweat dripping from his brow and ink
trickling from his brush. I then started to understand why this caused the stir that it did within the calligraphy scene of Beijing that early Spring. Zeng Xiang is not well known in the west, but in China’s calligraphy discourse, he is often mentioned, together with Wang Hao and Wo Xinghua. They are seen as the major contributors to a contemporary calligraphy movement called “ugly calligraphy” (choushu 丑书), although he himself does not associate himself with that label. When I interview him at his exhibition, asking if he writes ugly calligraphy, he notes:

Hahaha. No, this is not ugly calligraphy. That is just a secular view. Strictly speaking, people who have not received education in aesthetics would say that, they don’t understand. This is not ugly. They tell you: this is not calligraphy, it is insulting calligraphy, how can calligraphy be like this, how can you write calligraphy like this? For us, this is a development in calligraphy; it is a type of innovation. Wang Dongling writes chaos script, I think it is very good. And Xu Bing made Book of the Sky, who has not heard of that? (Interview 31)

“Ugly calligraphy” as a term appeared in the 1980s, and has proved difficult to pigeonhole: although critiques and opinions abound, there is no common agreement of what constitutes this type of calligraphy. Zongchao Liu argues that the “ugly” in ugly calligraphy should not be seen as an aesthetic category, but simply defines all those calligraphies that are disharmonious, asymmetric, and inconsistent in appearance. Among them, some are “beautiful in their ugliness”, while others are truly “ugly (non-art)” (2016, 139). Many consider 2002 as the time when “ugly calligraphy” acquired greater prominence as a distinctive category, when Wo Xinghua – acclaimed calligrapher who himself writes what some have classified as “ugly” – wrote the piece “Discussing Ugly Calligraphy” (Lun chou shu 论丑书, 2002).

In this article, like many ardent defenders of the field often do, Wo harks back to examples in calligraphic history in order to claim legitimacy for his contemporary practice; early Qing calligrapher Fu Shan (1607-1684) in particular is often mentioned in these writings.

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57 I am part of several calligraphy-related WeChat groups in which participants chat about calligraphy, share articles, and share their own calligraphic works. In all these groups, Zeng Xiang’s work was heavily debated at the time of the exhibition, even in a group dedicated to font design. Where some bluntly stated to hate it, others valued his daring works.
Pursuing the unbalanced, the ugly and the strange, proponents point out, is not unusual in the history of Chinese art. Liu argues that clumsy, ugly or childlike character-writing has always existed, and traces the phenomenon back to as early as the Dunhuang manuscripts (2016, 139). Galambos likewise shows how in Dunhuang manuscripts, mistakes were made, and instead of throwing the manuscript away, mistakes were corrected, which led to smudgy, scratched and uneven rows of calligraphy (2013).

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, calligraphers such as Wang Duo (1592-1652) and Fu Shan actively pursued strangeness and ugliness in their works, the former believing that strangeness was hidden within the familiar structure of the characters, and the latter taking the view that one should go beyond existing structures and outside notions of “beauty” in creating calligraphy. Fu Shan experimented with inventing bogus characters based on archaic scripts, dripped blots of ink on his calligraphy, and created long meandering lines. Dora Y.C Ching mentions about Fu that “Concocting new character forms by experimenting with ancient scripts gave him an avenue to express his creativity” (1999, 355) – here Xu Bing’s creative character inventions come to mind.

Not only the urge to be creative, but also the deception upon discovering the questionable morals of his former models led Fu Shan to change his calligraphy style. Fu had always modeled his calligraphy after Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322), but after realizing that Zhao served the non-Chinese Yuan dynasty after the fall of the Song dynasty, Fu Shan regarded Zhao as a traitor and felt inclined to take on a new, more respectable, model: Yan Zhenqing, the morally upright calligrapher pur sang we have encountered in chapter one. He became “disgusted with the superficiality and vulgarity of his [Zhao Mengfu’s] calligraphy, which has no backbone” (in Bai 2003, 101), and Fu Shan then chose to model his writing after something he considered less beautiful, but sincerer, writing the words that are so often quoted by proponents of the current ugly calligraphy scene:

I would rather [my calligraphy] be awkward, not skillful; ugly, not pleasing; deformed, not

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58 The “strange” or “marvelous” (qi 奇) rose to prominence as a concept in art theory in the Late Ming, and the term carries a range of meanings. With regards to the scope of this section, I do not pursue a critical investigation of the term, and translate qi 奇 as “strange”.

59 The Dunhuang Manuscripts are a large collection of secular and religious manuscripts dating from the 4th to the 11th century, discovered in the Mogao caves in Dunhuang in the early 20th century.
slick; spontaneous, not premeditated.\textsuperscript{60} (in Wo 2002, translation taken from Bai 2003).

It was the beginning of a calligraphy movement that purposely did not take the elegant and refined style of Wang Xizhi and his son as their models, but maintained that the calligraphy on ancient stone steles and bronze – the previously mentioned \textit{Stele school} (\textit{Beixue pai} 碑学派), were superior, because they were original and not deteriorated by endless copying, as had been the norm for centuries. I have elaborated on the context surrounding calligrapher Fu Shan, not only because he is so often used as a leading legitimizing example\textsuperscript{61} when it comes to pursuing the strange or ugly in contemporary discourses of calligraphy, but also, because his motivations to deviate from the norms were driven by a conflating mix of motivations and emotions that, I suggest, inform the current new wave of ugly calligraphies as well. It was politically motivated: Fu Shan was led by “disgust” with the vulgarity of his previous ideal model, and he had aesthetic incentives: beauty, according to Fu Shan, should be found in the ugly-yet-sincere. His endeavor, in short, was to unsettle through aesthetic means, much like Rancière describes, by breaking down “the symbolic constitution of the social” (2015, 36).

It is noteworthy that more than 300 years after Fu Shan, the power of ugly calligraphy to unsettle and upset has not waned. The opinions that circulate about ugly calligraphy today range from the absolute offensive, like Wei Wei when he argues that it is “a plague”, “spreading like germs” and is “polluting the younger generations”; those doing it are in “an abnormal state of mind, have a distorted soul, coupled with ignorance and shallowness” (Wei 2014, 344-345) to the more mellow:

\textit{We welcome innovation. Innovation is the only way forward for the arts. To be able to

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ning wu qiao, ning chou wu mei, ning zhili wu qinghua, ning zhen shuai wu anpai} 宁毋巧宁丑毋媚宁支离
毋轻滑宁真率毋安排.

\textsuperscript{61} Fu Shan’s writings are often used as an historic example by contemporary calligraphers to legitimize their choice for making daring works, but his work is employed in other ways as well. The exhibition on Modern Chinese calligraphy, “\textit{Secret signs}”, in Hamburg in 2015 displayed contemporary calligrapher Shan Fan’s work, “\textit{Calligraphy of Slowness}” (2015). This work is a copy of Fu Shan’s work. Shan Fan copied this piece, slowly filling in the broad strokes—they were originally painted in one single brush stroke—with tiny strokes of his own small brush. The whole work took him 210 hours to complete. The duration of this work makes it a very different activity from the original calligraphy that would have been written with speed. This double layering of unusual methods and estrangement is another tactic employed in the broad spectrum of contemporary calligraphy.
innovate better, we must boldly and confidently fight against ‘ugly calligraphy’. If we
cannot distinguish the five beauties, cannot discern fragrance from stench and if our
reasoning is unclear, then we are not able to have meaningful innovation. It is like poet
Ai Qing said: ‘Art must have originality, but is it definitely not the case that all innovation
is art. The madman is the most innovative, but he is definitely not an artist’ (Peng 2018).

I look at the aesthetic construction of five of Zeng Xiang’s works that were displayed
in his solo-exhibition of April 2018: “Spring and Autumn Calligraphy: The Lion Roars (Chunqiu bifa shizi hou 春秋笔法·狮子吼).

The centerpiece of the show is a series comprising four large works that all feature the single, and hardly discernable, character, kong 空, meaning empty or space. The character “empty”, in a twist of irony, fills up the surface of rice paper. The works are written with a hefty bespoke brush and it is immediately evident that they have been made with speed. The edges of the brushstrokes are rough, splashes of ink around the bends point at rapid movements of the brush, and the expressive lashes of ink connecting the separate strokes are unrefined and hastily made. Except for one (figure 25), which is made

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62 The exhibition is named after Chinese Buddhist imagery: the lion is a symbol for bravery and strength. Information on the exhibition can be found here http://exhibit.artron.net/exhibition-56743.html
with lighter and narrower brushstrokes, the other three works in the series are heavily loaded with a deep blueish black ink, dried up on the paper, giving the piece an almost 3D-like quality. It is not clear from the work itself whether the ink is applied in layers or brushed on at once with a very wet brush. The immediacy of the aesthetics, however, suggests the latter. All the characters are square-shaped, and as such, the single characters remind of the square-shaped characters seen in calligraphies belonging to the Stele School.

It is significant that the character kong 空 is still legible, as this shows that Zeng is not deviating from script, nor does he take away the literary content of the characters — as we know, staying within the boundaries of legibility is a common marker to designate whether something should still be considered calligraphy.
The series are further reminiscent of the work of modern Japanese calligrapher Yuichi Inoue (1916-1985), who created highly expressionist single-character works that he would often perform live (Duan 2018). Also, Huai Su (737-799) and Zhang Xu (8th century) come to mind, the two most renowned cursive calligraphers of the Tang dynasty who are generally referred to as “the crazy Zhang and the drunk Su”, and known for their eccentric and explosive performances of live calligraphy, written while drunk, sometimes using their long hair instead of a brush.

Zeng Xiang, sweating, screaming and heavily panting while he writes, argues, however, that the term “performance” (biaoyan 表演) does not do justice to what he attempts, as performance implies a staged insincerity. As an artist, he conveys in our interview, being in the moment of creation is not a performance, but should be seen as a state of being (zhuangtai 状态):

Many people in China too think that this is a performance. But in fact, it is not. It is the understanding of everything the artist has learned and practiced (xiulian 修炼) being mirrored on rice paper at the most effective moment. (interview 31)

The artist stresses that the inner feelings that come out at this well-timed moment are paramount. Although the end result might be something anyone is be able to produce, the artist, as an accumulator of artistic and traditional knowledge, is the only one who can create this, through his feelings, at this moment in time.

Accompanying these works is a large television set-up that features prominently in the exhibition space. Entering the space, you hear loud screaming (hence, it is suggested, the name of the exhibition, “Lion’s roar” [Peng 2018]) coming from the video, featuring Zeng Xiang making the kong 空 series. By showing the process of creation as well as the work itself, the work offers a logic of double immediacy: while the piece in itself is already highly suggestive of the full body movements of the artist, this is rendered acutely present with the added visual and audial demonstration of its creation (Bolter and Grusin 2000). This immediacy, I contend, further suggests this sought-after quality of sincerity: with both process and result in full view, it is clear that no hidden methods, tactics or unnecessary embellishments have gone into the work.
The complexity of the notion of ugly and beautiful in Chinese calligraphy arises here. In chapter one, I suggested that having good handwriting is typically associated with a corresponding good moral character – hence the insistence of proper learning and the careful selection of morally upright models. Ugly calligraphy breaks with this paradigm: beauty, as Fu Shan noted as well, is in this sense seen as too affected, vain, insincere and self-aware. From this perspective, crude and ugly writings do not reveal a person’s bad character, but quite the opposite: they show a brave searching for true emotion, and an earnest exploration of the boundaries and definitions of aesthetics. The deviation from beauty, however, comes with a price. Calligraphers still carry a responsibility for culture, which can, as it turns out, not be represented in the ugly without impunity. This is evident in the critiques that call Zeng’s works “a national crime” and “poison” (Zhenji 2018).

Lin Daojun, in commenting on Zeng Xiang, argues that his works are far from a national crime, but he is, instead, doing the nation a favor. “Calligraphy is already dead”, he states: when in the west the invention of photography led to somber reflections that “painting is dead”, in the digital age, the functionality of calligraphy likewise is gone (2018). Lin argues that instead of disappearing, western painting did actually reinvent itself, and influenced by the light and everydayness of photography, creative currents such as Impressionism, Dadaism and Fauvism appeared. Like the ugly calligraphers, these currents were initially ridiculed and mocked. Lin therefore argues that Zeng Xiang, does the only thing possible with the “dead art” of calligraphy: he reinterprets it, makes it an artistic spectacle that unsettles, and as such, allows it to survive in modern, digital times where calligraphy has lost its practical application (Ibid.).

The second large piece of the exhibition is called “origin” (qiyuan 起源) and makes clear reference to the bronze and oracle bone scripts – as the title suggests, the origins of Chinese writing (figure 27). The artist has composed a bricolage of ancient writings, pictographic characters, actual drawings, hieroglyphs, lines, dots and hints of animal traces in a seemingly arbitrary order, with none of them actually being oracle bone characters or other ancient script-types: they are all creative interpretations. The ink is crudely brushed on, interspersed with flying white, thick black strokes and arranged in chaotic columns. The spectator is invited to stand in front of the work and to separate pictograph from character from image, and the legible from the illegible, thus drawing you in with its many possibilities. None of the symbols
are part of the Chinese script, yet, it is a convincing mix: the signs appear to be a part of the Chinese script system. On ancient script types, Andrea Bachner argues how “a master narrative of cultural coherence and scriptural stability incessantly scripts them as recognizably Chinese” (2014, 171). Here, something similar occurs: the work looks convincingly primordial, yet with a creative twist – playful, distorted, messy. Placed in an exhibition together with Zeng’s ink-drenched calligraphic works, this work contradicts and functions as antidote – while still very expressive, this is a work that hints not at an uncertain future, but at a common origin. In this work too, Zeng Xiang plays with the legible and the real.

![Figure 27: Zeng Xiang. Origin. Ink on canvas. 144×734cm](image)

It is familiar, recognizable as some sort of oracle bone script, but not quite, and lingers between meaning and non-scriptural expression, image and script, this time leaving it to the viewer to extract meaning and deciding what in the artwork is (still) image, and what is, or was in the process of becoming, ancient script.

As shown in the analysis of both works, both the Kong series and Origin allow for a reconfiguration of the sensible. The works visualize a new future for calligraphy as an expressive art form, and reshape perceptions of archaic script. The police order, as a general implicit law that “divides up the sensible” (Rancière 2015, 36) is disrupted through the works
of Zeng Xiang. They intervene on different levels. First, the Kong series reinterprets calligraphy as emotional, ugly and spectacular, and introduces additional sensory perceptions by showing a video of the works’ inception. Second, the piece Origin deconstructs the idea of cultural coherence and scriptural stability through creative play with scriptural elements – and although this has been attempted before by innovators such as Fu Shan, this case shows how the power of these tactics continues to unsettle.

Rancière’s contention that art is political becomes acutely clear when looking at the responses the works evoke: they are seen as a national crime, as polluting the younger generation, even polluting China’s cherished cultural heritage. Zeng Xiang himself, however, feels quite the opposite: his works are steeped in tradition, and he presents himself as a “dreamer”: someone who takes traditional scripts and viewpoints and molds them for the needs of the modern world, where exhibition and play are important to its survival (M. Lu 2014; Zeng 2018).

In the next analysis, I examine the work of Qiu Zhijie, who also builds on ancient works, but does so in a very literal fashion: Qiu copied the Orchid Pavilion a thousand times.


The Preface of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion (Lanting ji xu 兰亭集序, hereafter The Orchid Pavilion), written by the sage of calligraphy Wang Xizhi (303-361 CE) of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 CE), is the most revered and most often copied piece of calligraphy. It would be no exaggeration to say that this particular work has been copied consecutively for over 1600 years. To visualize such an effort, one should imagine millions and millions of copies of this single piece of calligraphy written by this one man at a party and scattered throughout China; mounted on silk; carved in stone and rubbed off again from these steles on paper; hidden away in emperors’ tomb stones; crumpled up in bins; analyzed in calligraphy schools; and on display in museums. And more recently, as shown in this study: written ephemerally by water calligraphers in city parks; digitalized and embedded in calligraphy.

63 Often dated from 1990-1995, Meiling Cheng, however, corrects the inception of Qiu’s The Preface of the Orchid Pavilion to 1990-1997 (Cheng 2009, 33), and I will follow her amendment, as Hopfener has argued that Qiu Zhijie himself corrected the dates in a conversation with Cheng (Hopfener 2014, 3).
learning apps and online museums; and – almost inevitably – reimagined by contemporary artists. This is the context in which we must place the artwork that was made by Qiu Zhijie from 1990 to 1997, in order to do justice to its implications.

Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969) is an artist, a critic as well as a professor at the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. He works with an eclectic array of artistic media: ink, photography, sculpture and performance art. Many of his better-known works translate traditional artistic techniques into conceptual pieces, leaving it to the viewer to decide whether they should be seen in opposition to Chinese tradition, or in line with that tradition (see Hopfener 2014). We encounter the same ambiguous negotiation in *Copying the Preface of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion a Thousand Times*. Qiu Zhijie chose to copy *The Orchid Pavilion* using the characters in the style of Wang Xizhi, according to the traditional rules of calligraphy, a thousand times, over the course of seven years. Instead of using a thousand different sheets of rice paper, Qiu wrote on just one sheet of rice paper, writing the characters on top of each other. The result is a sheet of paper that is heavy and thick with monochromic black ink, on which all traces of legibility have disappeared. When exhibiting, the artwork is made up of a multimedia installation combining video, photography and calligraphy: it comprises a 35-minute video with footage of the first 50 times that Qiu Zhijie copied the work, five digital photographic prints from different stages of the process, and the final original piece of rice paper and ink.\(^{64}\) The video – like the work made by Zeng Xiang, creates a logic of double immediacy. Already after making 50 copies, the work was completely black, which effectively means that for the remaining 950 times, Qiu wrote *The Orchid Pavilion* on a black surface with black ink, not being able to see the result of his labor.

From the multiple ways to probe this artwork, it is most easily read as a critical contemporary commentary on Chinese tradition, Chineseness and Chinese art at large, as it effectively renders a well-known symbol of Chinese cultural tradition illegible – it cannot speak and it cannot be read anymore. Julia Tan has quoted Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu, who describes how a meaningful paradigm was rendered meaningless in the work: “The solemn practice of calligraphy was transformed into a meaningless game, an absurd play of signifier without signification. Indeed, the repetitive, mechanical nature of Qiu’s work allows the

\(^{64}\) The work was first exhibited at the exhibition “Inside Out: New Chinese Art”, co-organized by SFMOMA and Asia Society New York in 1998. The exhibition travelled from New York to San Francisco in 1999, and then travelled around the world until 2001 (Gao 2012).
viewer to question the cherished rituals and procedures in traditional Chinese art and culture” (Lu 2000, 164, in Tan 2008, 131). Gao similarly chooses to stretch the implication of the artwork more widely by including all those throughout history who have made copies of the piece (and never the original) as it “exists not in the visible document, but in the cumulative memories and imaginations of numerous individuals” (2006, 154). As tempting as it is to link (contemporary) art directly to criticality, the blackness and visual negation of the work can alternatively prompt the question whether Qiu possibly particularly dislikes *The Orchard Pavilion*. In his personal statement on the work, Qiu notes that his choice for this specific piece relates to its fame: “The choice for *The Orchid Pavilion* was not made out of a particular love or interest for the Motherland, but because of its high status” (Qiu 2005). Intriguingly, Qiu mentions the Motherland, and not the calligraphic piece itself, indicating that he recognizes the strong implications between calligraphic work and the nation.

I analyze Qiu Zhijie’s work from the point of view of the artist’s personal practice in relationship to Wang’s canonical piece. It is important to realize that copying this work a
thousand times would be about the minimum amount of time it takes one single practitioner to be able to produce acceptable copies of the original. It is clear from the very first, still legible and well executed piece that Qiu already is a proficient calligrapher (see figure 28). Nothing about this rendering is ugly, chaotic or in any way provoking. The columns are straight, the calligraphy is tasteful and neat and written in the elegant Wang-style. Is the artwork perhaps a personal reflection on, or condensed visualization of, the time Qiu Zhijie has already spent mastering the skill, grieving the lost hours? What Qiu has done, would in a traditional literati context be viewed as an act of self-cultivation. Through connecting with the work and its maker, the copier is believed to embody the artist’s values, while it simultaneously secures him a position in the calligraphic canon, thus ensuring continuity through the intertwining of copy and original. Lao Zhu notes in this respect: “the existence of the calligrapher will not position others as audiences only, his existence will inspire everybody to become a calligrapher” (Lao Zhu in J. Xu 2011, 17).

Lacking in Qiu’s copies is, evidently, the traceability of this embodiment. By not producing a thousand copies that are all readable, all shareable, and all separately affirming their place in the on-going stream of contributions to the body of calligraphic works, Qiu Zhijie deliberately places himself outside the historical narrative, and puts a considered halt to the traditional convention of production. Yet, he is not dramatically destroying them, by ripping them apart, burning them, or not writing them in the first place. Instead, it is his own physical calligraphic labor that is doing away the production. I therefore read this work as a personal destruction that carries implications for calligraphic practice as a whole. By emphasizing the artistic process over the finished product, Qiu Zhijie’s intentionally futile copying frees the act of calligraphy from its traditional function, but also from the multi-interpretability of the calligraphic character, and as such returns to the act of writing itself. This is, I argue, the main artistic intervention of Qiu Zhijie’s work. With this act, however, he simultaneously pulls calligraphy back to the core values of the tradition – copying, script, self-cultivation and discipline.

Yet, the more frivolous parts, perhaps the joy, of The Orchid Pavilion have disappeared in the process: the original piece, written spontaneously and drunkenly, is turned into a laborious and pitch-black work, dull and devoid of its original legible meaning. What remains is the act of writing – as such it celebrates all those who have throughout its long history, anonymously copied this piece. They, including Qiu Zhijie, might be the ones who are now the
The works of Wang Dongling, Zeng Xiang and Qiu Zhijie show considerate and deliberate aberrations from traditional calligraphic practice. They are part of the discourse of contemporary calligraphy in which, to reiterate Gu Gan, script can be imagined as a pleasure ground and a paradise for free imagination. This new position has led to deviations ranging from the absurd to the sublime. Much is possible, as we have seen: from screaming and splashing ink, writing chaos, to the erasure of a canonical work. But we have also learned that finding pleasure in creativity does not mean there is nothing at stake: this pleasure ground is also a minefield, where every line, thought and irregularity stem from a careful positioning vis-à-vis traditional calligraphy and remain under strict scrutiny. In this discursive minefield, Zeng Xiang’s work can be denounced a national crime, and Wang Dongling, with his continuous loyalty to the traditional calligraphic line, can be elevated as a hero.

I asked at the start of this chapter if there is a case to make in approaching the aesthetic alterations in contemporary calligraphic works as a (political) critique. Rancière has argued that aesthetics and politics are inherently intertwined; that tie is made clear through a “making visible”. It is at that junction that these three artists should be positioned with regards to their criticality: their works contest the plausible and the standard, and are invested in making visible what was invisible in earlier patterns and as such, they deconstruct the dominant image of what calligraphy should look like. I have, however, also showed how maverick calligraphers existed in the past, and these contemporary calligraphies take clear inspiration from them. How “invisible”, then, should we consider these calligraphies? The crux, I suggest, lies in providing alternative representations of calligraphy that remain visually close enough to still be considered part of a calligraphy scene, and yet, still, unsettle.

Wang Dongling has redistributed the existing sensible by introducing body movements and expressive calligraphic performances. He does so in a conscious endeavor to make calligraphy available for a global audience that cannot read Chinese. Instead of focusing on content, Wang borrows tactics from contemporary art to get across an emotion – what he believes is the essence of calligraphy and lies within the calligraphic line. In his final experiment of chaos script, almost nothing from traditional calligraphy remains, except the
discernible calligraphic line. That line, in which we find remnants of the calligraphy styles of those Wang copied, allows his experiments to remain safely within the realm of calligraphy.

Zeng Xiang is redistributing the sensible by a conscious antithetical positioning: instead of validating the beautiful, the symmetric and the consistent, Zeng renders visible the ugly and the visceral, as such separating the conventional from the beautiful. Yet, the aesthetics of his work make clear reference to the calligraphic past. Zeng weaves historical fragments of preceding idiosyncratic calligraphies showing that a construction of contemporary calligraphy is necessarily related to its past.

And finally, Qiu Zhijie is challenging the existing aesthetic regime by validating the physical and laborious process of writing over the end result, thus stepping out of the tradition of creating a traceable lineage of writing and copying. Qiu renders visible the hours spent learning the craft of calligraphy by compressing time in his work. Qiu Zhijie’s deliberately futile copying frees the act of calligraphy from function, but also from the multi-interpretability of the character – which makes it so susceptible to creative interpretation – and as such returns to the act of writing itself.

I further asked: how to be of your time, when you make something that is supposed to be similar to works made more than a thousand years ago? The works of the three artists manifest a noticeable pre-occupation with time. What does this time need from us, calligraphers? How can we keep calligraphy relevant? How do we rescue calligraphy from obsolescence in the digital age? What strategies and tactics must it adopt to maintain its relevance, as it is increasingly being surrounded by emerging western artistic influences and a thriving art market? Modern times need spectacle – then we create spectacle. Modern times are chaotic – then we make chaotic calligraphy. In modern times people like to go to museums and galleries – we create large works that can be exhibited. This self-awareness – realizing that modern times are critical times for calligraphy, is answered by speculating on how to best serve modernity. The attitude of concern on what is needed, and how a calligrapher might attend to that need, still hints at a gentleman-scholar’s attitude – the traditional calligrapher as the scribe who labors for the nation – and in this reading the question of critique fades to the background.

This looking back, while necessarily having to go forward generates a teleological view of calligraphy versus modern art – the idea that, with time, calligraphy should morph into, or
increasingly has to resemble, contemporary art to ensure its survival. Zeng Xiang articulated this view most clearly:

I belong to the traditionalists, those who study the calligraphic line. They (Xu Bing and Wang Dongling) do too, but they became contemporary artists earlier on (my emphasis). It is like the rabbit and tortoise race; do you know that story? We are slow, but Xu Bing and Wang Dongling are fast like rabbits. I am the tortoise. (Interview 31)

Zeng thus juxtaposes calligraphy and contemporary art. He argues, however, that calligraphy is in a stage of “becoming”, guided by those who can think the quickest of new and creative ways: the “rabbits”.

The overall concern with how and what to reform in order to preserve calligraphy, how to do that and what that will look like, is also paramount in the next chapter, where I explore remediations of the calligraphic sign in precisely the domain that many fear will cause the demise of calligraphy: the digital realm.