

## Negotiating with the Past: The Art of Calligraphy in Post-Mao China

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**Abstract:** Chinese Calligraphy, an integrated form that combines language, art, philosophy, and poetry, was considered the highest art in traditional China. Although no longer used for daily communication, calligraphy manages to sustain its presence in Chinese cultural life even in the computer age. The classical forms that were canonized nearly two millennia ago continue to command a large following while new styles and new practices have emerged in response to social, cultural and artistic influences. This paper looks at present trends in calligraphy and calligraphy-inspired practices against the backdrop of tradition. It is apparent that even within the most radical changes that have taken place, whether in the way calligraphy is practiced or evaluated, there are strong indications that the fundamental aesthetic principles passed down from the past are still very much alive today, showing the resilience of this ancient art.

**Keywords** writing; art; calligraphy; language

Chinese calligraphy, an integrated form that combines language, art, philosophy, and poetry, was considered the highest art in traditional China, “the most fundamental artistic manifestation of the national mind.”<sup>1</sup> Although no longer used for daily communication, calligraphy manages to sustain its presence in Chinese cultural life even in the computer age. The classical forms that were canonized nearly two millennia ago continue to command a large following, while new styles and new practices have emerged in response to social, cultural, and artistic influences. It is apparent that even within the most radical changes that have taken place, whether in the way calligraphy is practiced or evaluated, there are strong indications that the fundamental aesthetic principles passed down from the past are still very much alive today, showing the resilience of this ancient art. What distinguishes recent developments in calligraphy is a trend that favors removing boundaries between high and low cultures and between calligraphy and other forms of human activity.

Since the 1980s, interest in calligraphy has bifurcated generally in two directions: the traditional and the avant-garde, with the former embraced by calligraphy departments of higher learning as well as amateur calligraphy enthusiasts and the latter primarily by art institutions and independent artists. Traditional forms and aesthetics perfected by masters from the country’s venerated past are enjoying a popularity unseen in the Maoist era. Their practitioners put an emphasis on continuing the “grand tradition,”<sup>2</sup> which stresses rigorous training in fundamental techniques in order to achieve balance and grace. As the most popular forms practiced by amateurs and professionals alike, the classical genres can be found everywhere from temple plaques to shop signs, from prized scrolls hung in conference halls to practice sheets used by senior citizens and elementary school students. Masterpieces from the past are still religiously copied. Wang Xizhi (303–361), Wang Xian-

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zhi (244–386), Ouyang Xun (557–641), Yan Zhenqing (709–984), Huai Su (725–785), Liu Gongquan (778–865), and others up through the Song dynasty (960–1276), remain the most admired master calligraphers. What has endured is not only their calligraphy but also the literary, philosophical, spiritual, and moral qualities these ancient masters and their works embody. Brush writing, as believed in this time-honored tradition, is more than an artistic expression; it is also a form of spiritual cultivation, a practice that has the potential to instill positive character traits in the practitioner. Qi Gong (1912–2005) was arguably the most famous of this school of practitioners in the post-Mao era. His work recalls the elegance of ancient works. In the footsteps of the multitalented Confucian scholars in the past, Qi Gong was also a scholar of Chinese classics, painting, phonology, semantics, and literature as well as a highly respected expert at authenticating ancient relics. A university professor most of his life, Qi Gong is remembered by his students to have been unassuming despite his national fame, espousing traditional values of erudition and moral conduct in addition to his virtuoso skills of calligraphy.

One of the signs of the revival of traditional genres in the post-Mao era is the establishment of calligraphy and calligraphy studies as an academic discipline in universities. Nearly five decades after the first calligraphy and inscription department was established in 1963 at the Zhejiang Art Institute, more than seventy colleges and universities now offer BA degrees in calligraphy and calligraphy studies, most of which have been added in the past twenty-five years. Many of these institutions train students to become future teachers of calligraphy, passing down the ancient heritage from one generation to another. Thus the calligraphy departments act as keepers of tradition, providing a crucial link to the past, while encouraging innovation and scholarly research. At the same time, there has been a proliferation of calligraphy interest groups, particularly among retirees whose regularly held competitions and workshops have helped make calligraphy a popular movement across the nation. Working as if in a concerted effort, the ivory tower of higher learning and grassroots communities have kept traditional calligraphy a living art and made it relevant to contemporary life.

As traditional genres stand their ground among academics and amateur practitioners, new forms have emerged to put calligraphy on the very front of experimental art. The most controversial pieces have been created by the so-called avant-gardes, or modernists or postmodernists,<sup>3</sup> as they are variably called, who seem bent on challenging the conventional definition of calligraphy. While garnering fame and fortune abroad, the avant-gardes are yet to be warmly embraced inside China.<sup>4</sup> By way of distorting and disfiguring characters through novel techniques and compositions, they have produced works violently disconcerting to a viewer with more traditional sensibilities. Not tethered to the past, the avant-gardes consider their mission to be dismantling the aesthetic principles held dear by traditional calligraphers. Like reckless and rebellious children determined to rip apart a cherished family heirloom, they treat tradition as something to be questioned or demolished. The most notable among the avant-gardes is Xu Bing, whose “Book from the Sky” (*Tian shu*) is composed of indecipherable graphs similar in appearance to Chinese characters but of his own creation. Xu also designed a computer program with which a person inputs English words on the keyboard, but receives printouts in character-looking graphs. As far as the avant-gardes are concerned, the brush, ink and paper, fundamental elements required in calligraphy, are expendable. Wang Dazhong, for example, did a piece entitled “Collection of Words by Famous Calligraphers since Ancient Times” (*Cai gu lai neng shu ren yu*), a collage of characters in various scripts and styles originally written by master calligraphers. Clearly, the goal for the avant-gardes is no longer to make beautiful art, as the traditionalists do, but to invite the viewer to reflect on history and culture in the best

scenario or simply to create sensationalism in the worst case. The group that has drawn the most contempt is the so-called performance calligraphers, who have presented a variety of spectacles, such as writing on clothes in a fashion show or two men carrying a woman, one holding her head and the other her feet, and dragging her inked hair over a large piece of paper placed on the ground.

Controversial projects such as these have been the topic of endless debates and turf wars. The more traditionally minded critics argue that rearranging characters written by others in a collage and inventing unreadable graphs cannot, by definition, be considered calligraphy; instead, it should be called conceptual art or abstract art. Performance calligraphy, in their view, is nothing but gimmicks aimed at shocking its audience. The avant-garde exponents, however, insist that their works are composed of the same linear elements found in Chinese characters, even when they are parodying or subverting traditional forms. They see themselves as making important contributions to the art of calligraphy by injecting new blood into an otherwise ossified tradition. To be sure, the avant-gardes are interested in a wide range of artistic possibilities and thematic concerns and traditional Chinese calligraphy is only one of their inspirations. They also have taken lessons from Japanese modernist calligraphy developed in the 1960s, such as works by Inoue Yu-Ichi (1916–1985) and Teshima Yukei (1901–1987), and Western abstract art, conceptual art, installation art, and performance art, which streamed into China all at once in the 1980s. According to the avant-gardes, their attempt is to separate calligraphy from the myth of the so-called “national spirit” and to treat it as a form that needs to be continuously renewed, like any other art.<sup>5</sup> In their view, the umbilical cord that connects calligraphy to the function of a written language has long been severed and the distinction between “writing” (*shuxie*) and “calligraphy” (*shufa*) has been clearly drawn. The traditionalists, on the other hand, vehemently insist on the intimate relationship of character writing and calligraphy art. The disagreement between these two camps essentially centers on whether calligraphic graphs are still linguistic signifiers and whether the traditional mode of writing with brush, ink, and paper is required to make calligraphy. The fact that such an issue is being hotly debated today, decades after the brush was replaced first by the pen and more recently by the keyboard, is a testament to the powerful hold calligraphy has on the cultural, intellectual, and emotional well-being of the Chinese people.

As performance calligraphy becomes fodder for ridicule, another form of performance inspired by traditional calligraphy is winning wide acclaim. Cloud Gate, a modern dance company in Taiwan, has staged several shows inspired by traditional Chinese calligraphy, including “Trilogy of the Cursive Script” (*Xing cao sanbuqu*) and “Water Stains on the Wall” (*Wu lou hen*). With blown-up images of writings by Wang Xizhi, Huai Su, and others projected on the background, the dancers use their bodies as brushes and the floor as paper and “write calligraphy” on the stage, their deft and graceful movements reminiscent of calligraphy’s free-flowing ink. The Cloud Gate dancers are not calligraphers, although calligraphy practice is included in their daily training regimen. Similar to calligraphy, dance places stress on the application of strength, movement, rhythm, energy, and spirit, so that the mind and the body become one. Lin Hwai-min, Cloud Gate’s artistic director and choreographer, points out that both calligraphy and dance contain “an endless demonstration of energy in circular movement” and both are “organic as nature itself.”<sup>6</sup>

In fact, calligraphy has long been associated with performance. Zhang Xu (675-759), known for his cursive script (*cao shu*) written while drunk, is said to have drawn lessons from Gongsun Daliang’s sword-dance movements, although dance inspired by calligraphy seems to be a modern phenomenon. In some ways the calligrapher is a performer, draw-

ing crowds of admirers, as Huai Su, Zhang Xu, and many other famed calligraphers often did. On rare occasions, a calligrapher could be called upon to perform under rather trying circumstances. During the Wei period (220–265), Wei Dan (179–251), the de facto court calligrapher of the Wei, was ordered to be lifted up to the height of several stories, as the plaque he was supposed to write on had already been installed without inscriptions. For fear of heights, Wei proceeded to destroy his brush and subsequently prohibited his descendants from ever practicing the regular script (*kai shu*), the chosen style for inscriptions at the time.<sup>7</sup> Presumably, the crowd gathered at the city gate lost an opportunity to watch the famous calligrapher deliver a potentially stunning performance.

Performing voluntarily and in much more comfortable environments, writers of “ground calligraphy” (*di shu*), which turns brush writing into a sort of group dance, are opening a new frontier for calligraphy. An activity favored by retirees attracted to it for its health and social benefit as well as its aesthetic appeal, ground calligraphy has spread like wildfire in Chinese cities and towns. Practitioners are frequently spotted in a park or an open public space, each holding a bucket of water and a homemade, long-handled tool, writing on the cement floor. The best ones among them often draw a large crowd of onlookers. The set of tools and materials they use is a far cry from the required tools and materials of “Four Treasures of a Scholar’s Studio” (*Wenfang si bao*): brush, paper, ink, and ink stone. According to Lady Wei (272–345), the brush should be made from “the hair of hare living on high peaks and precipitous cliffs... harvested in the eighth or ninth months of the year” and the best paper was that of “Dongyang fish ovum” known for its smooth and soft quality;<sup>8</sup> the ink used by Wang Xizhi is said to have been made of gold and cinnabar and “worth the price of gold”;<sup>9</sup> and the ink stone had to have perfect grain to produce the right consistency, the kind that when an ink stick was being ground on it, it was like “wax touching a hot iron, soundless but sticky.”<sup>10</sup> The ancient Chinese calligraphers were so exacting about their material that substandard substitutes were considered hindrances to their work. Xiang Mu (1550?–1660?), a Ming dynasty connoisseur, compared a calligrapher given inferior tools to an ill-equipped soldier in a battle: “Writing on paper that is not smooth and fine is like a brave general on a fast horse going through thorns and mud, unable to gallop ahead; using a brush that is not strong and flexible is like a determined and burly soldier holding an old, broken, and dull weapon, unable to attack his enemy; dipping in ink that is not exquisite is like training an army without proper provisions.”<sup>11</sup>

Occasionally, many famed calligraphers did go for unusual tools and materials. Instead of a brush, Zhang Xu used his own hair or robe, often in a drunken state, to produce fine calligraphy; Pei Xingjian (619–682) dipped his sleeve in ink to write for a temple; Shi Yannian (994–1041) once rolled up a rug and wrote on plaques; Wang Xianzhi opted for an old broom to write on a wall, leaving behind a piece of work that even his famous father couldn’t help but admire. These spontaneous acts with unconventional tools produced works that could not be repeated even by the calligraphers themselves. Clearly, the celebrated tools have been discarded for something less refined. Therefore, there is nothing peculiar about writing on cement floor with a bucket of water and a sponge-tipped instrument.

Ground calligraphy is a grassroots movement, and calligraphers who see themselves as artists or professionals are unlikely to show up in a public square and mingle with amateur practitioners. As the movement is associated with communal activities pursued by retirees for social and health reasons, such as tai chi and various forms of communal dance, it is often seen as somewhat frivolous and low-brow. However, those who practice it love it. From all angles, ground calligraphy is an altogether wholesome exercise. It is environmen-

tally friendly, since it needs no ink or paper, hence, no litter; it is physically gratifying, as it involves coordination of the body and the mind; it is socially beneficial, as it is a shared experience among like-minded people; it is spiritually uplifting, as it is an artistic and cultural pursuit; and it is emotionally cathartic, as concentrating on nothing but producing perfectly aligned characters frees the mind from worldly worries. Zhao Fangping, a respected calligrapher in the city of Luoyang, describes a vivid scene of this practice in his rhymed prose, “Rhapsody of Ground Calligraphy”:

The sun rises and the clouds disperse, brilliant light splashing on the ground. In the recreation square next to the lotus pond, calligraphers arrive one after another, soon forming a sizable crowd. Bustling about in no hurry, they wet their brushes in clean water, a fragrant smell of ink floating in the air; with the spotless ground as paper, they start one stroke at a time. Some bend their legs, leaning forward with heads lowered; some move their arms, now lifting, now sweeping; others, with heads raised in total concentration, maneuver their gigantic brushes to make huge characters; still others, in hops and jumps, paint water dragons. The white-haired in their 70s or 80s write in great delight; the young and dashing hold tight the brushes while a gentle breeze caresses their faces; small children doodle, innocent and attractive as the pictures they create; young women play with their brushes, producing refined and graceful characters. Seen from a distance, they seem to be training in martial arts: up and down, left and right, calm indeed!<sup>12</sup>

This scene of calligraphy enthusiasts of all ages passionately engaged in writing is reminiscent of a famous scene in Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), painted by Zhao Yi (126?–184?) in his scathing essay, “Against the Cursive Script”:

The learners are so focused and work so hard that they don’t realize that they are exhausted. They work anxiously till late at night but still would not rest. They appear stressed and have no time for meals. They ruin a brush every ten days and consume several bars of ink every month. The collars and sleeves of their clothes are dark and their lips and teeth are often black. When among other people, they do not participate in the conversations but instead draw on the ground with their fingers or on the walls with sticks. Their arms are broken, skins scraped, fingers injured, and bones exposed dripping with blood, but they still would not rest.<sup>13</sup>

The passion for calligraphy was so intense then and every literate man and woman seemed to be so obsessed with writing a good hand that they would go to any length to improve their calligraphy. According to one well-known anecdote, when Zhong Yao (151–230) was still a child, he once caught sight of a work by master calligrapher Cai Yong (133–192) on the lap of Wei Dan. He begged Wei for it but was refused. He was so dejected that for three days “he beat his chest black and blue, coughing blood.” Cao Cao, the king himself, had to come and save his life with a magical pill. Later, after Wei Dan died, Zhong secretly had his grave opened and finally laid his hands on the book. From then on, so the story goes, his calligraphy improved in leaps and bounds.<sup>14</sup>

Compared with these half-crazed personalities, the group gathered in Luoyang is much more relaxed, as calligraphy for the twenty-first-century practitioners is recreational and fun, whereas for the students in the Han or Jin it was a much more serious pursuit, worthy of sacrificing one’s life for. In today’s Chinese communities, no matter how popular and how ubiquitous calligraphy is, it remains confined within certain circles. Gone are the days when calligraphy was a living, integrated medium, encompassing all aspects of literate societies.

Like all aspects of modern life, calligraphy is compartmentalized as an independent form of art in its own right and as a form of physical and mental exercise popular among the young and the retired. What characterizes the avant-gardes, the Cloud Gate dancers, and the ground calligraphy practitioners is the dissolving of boundaries not only between high and low cultures, but also between different cultural forms and institutions, a typical phenomenon of postmodernism. Interestingly, all these “unorthodox” practices can be traced to their ancient roots, be it writing with unconventional tools or associating calligraphy with performance.

In the same fashion, contemporary calligraphy criticism also retains many of the principles passed down from the past. Generally speaking, the traditional approach judges a work on three different aesthetic levels: “form” (*xing*), which includes execution of strokes, structure and composition; “rhythm” (*lüdong* or *jiezou*), which focuses on the control of movement and the application of strength; and finally “spirit” or “style” (*jingshen* or *fengge*), which deals with the personal quality that informs an artist’s work. Indeed, the Chinese written language traces its pictographic origin to the principle of “resemblance” (*xiang*) or “resemblance of form” (*xiang xing*). The idea of resemblance is further extended from “concrete resemblance” (*shi xiang*) to “abstract resemblance” (*xu xiang*), to include expressions of ideas, emotions, or spirit. It is said that Cang Jie, a legendary figure credited with having invented written Chinese, shaped the characters based on traces and marks that birds and animals left behind on the ground.<sup>15</sup> It is also said that when Cang Jie was creating characters, “grains rained down from the sky and ghosts cried at night.”<sup>16</sup> These legends suggest that the written word in its inception already contained two opposing but complementary aspects of human needs: the material and the spiritual. The written word, originally an image of an object but endowed with a certain mystical power, is able to move the natural and the supernatural worlds. In this vision, nature, spirit, man, and language are integrated as one unified entity. This philosophical view provides a theoretical support for the preferred language of traditional calligraphy criticism: that of analogy and metaphor, connecting calligraphy with human and animal movements as well as shapes and forms of objects, both real and imagined. Recognizing the important relationship between calligraphy and the natural world, Cai Yong, the Eastern Han calligrapher, offered the following description:

The structure of calligraphy calls for resemblance to form and appearance, like sitting and moving, coming and going, sleeping and rising, sad and happy; like worms eating tree leaves, like sharp swords and long daggers, strong bows and arrows, water and fire, clouds and fog, and the sun and the moon. Only when the strokes find corresponding elements in nature could the writing be called calligraphy.<sup>17</sup>

Cai pointed out, in no uncertain terms, that the ultimate inspiration of calligraphy is nature. Later Lady Wei, in the language of human and animal anatomy, made these famous remarks: “Those who know how to apply strength to their brushes produce works that show more bone; those who lack strength produce works that show more flesh. The writings that contain more bone and less flesh are called tendon calligraphy; those that contain more flesh and less bone are called ink pigs.”<sup>18</sup> Since then “bone,” “flesh,” and “tendon” became indispensable terminologies used to describe calligraphy. Centuries later, Su Shi (1037–1101) proposed five elements that were, in his view, essential for evaluating calligraphy: “spirit, energy, bone, flesh, and blood.”<sup>19</sup> Analogies such as these give students and critics some tools to understand and appreciate calligraphic works. But their usefulness is limited, as judging calligraphic work is an anamorphous business, comparable to diagnosing illness by “taking the pulse” of a patient, according to Su Shi.<sup>20</sup> Another abstruse term, similar to

the meaning of “spirit” is “tone” or “flavor” (*yun*). Without “tone” or “spirit,” a work would be “vulgar” (*su*), but too much of it could be detrimental in the eyes of some. Xiang Mu, for example, was opposed to his contemporaries learning the styles of Su Shi and Mi Fu (1051–1107), because he considered them too individualistic, too idiosyncratic, “heretical” (*yi duan*), “self-indulgent and reckless” (*zong er si*), “radical and arrogant” (*jili jinkua*), “extraordinary” (*chaoyue xunchang*), and with too much focus on “feelings and spirit” (*yiqi jingshen*) and not enough attention to “rules” (*guidu*).<sup>21</sup> To drive his point home, Xiang likened Su’s calligraphy to a “plump and good-looking maid recently promoted to the position of a lady, but still behaving coarsely, who, with a pair of unbound big feet, makes people laugh”; and Mi’s to “a flamboyant young man from a wealthy family, inflicted with ulcers and warts, trying his sword on a galloping horse, laughing and shouting, as if no one were watching.”<sup>22</sup> The same person’s work could elicit a completely different response. According to the Yuan dynasty calligrapher Li Xue’an (a.k.a. Pu Guang) (1237?–1327?), Mi Fu’s characters “could pierce the best swords and halberds, sharp, strong and invincible, sending fear into the heart of the enemy.”<sup>23</sup> Huang Tingjian (1045–1105), Su Shi’s contemporary, highly valued Su’s work for its “naturalness” (*tianran zigong*) and “winning tonality” (*yun sheng*).<sup>24</sup>

Nebulous as these terms may sound to a contemporary ear, there are others that are even more extravagant to the point of being unfathomable. The work of Shi Weize of the Tang dynasty was likened to “geese leaving prints on smooth sand and fish jumping into an abyss.”<sup>25</sup> A much more imaginative mind would be needed to understand what this calligraphy looks like. Zhang Huaiguan, a scholar in the Tang dynasty, quoted Zhong Yao’s comment on Lady Wei’s calligraphy as “shattering the ice in a jade pot, and fragmenting the moon over the jade terrace, graceful as a flowering tree and serene as a gentle breeze.”<sup>26</sup> While “a flowering tree” and “a gentle breeze” do give the reader some tangible references, “ice in a jade pot,” which indicates translucency and smoothness, and “jade terrace,” the celestial realm of immortals, tell us very little about the style of her writing. What these lavish and fantastic imageries create is an illusion of an exceedingly beautiful work; the reader is left to figure out its precise style and appearance.

Though widely accepted and practiced in traditional Chinese calligraphy criticism, this kind of language was called into question by a handful of critics. Mi Fu, considered one of the best calligraphers of the Song dynasty, challenged the usefulness of such highly illusive language. He questioned the commentaries made by Yuan Ang of the Southern Liang dynasty (502–557): “Dragon jumping over the gate of heaven and tiger crouching at the palace of the phoenix’—what kind of language is that?”<sup>27</sup> Echoing Mi Fu, Zhu Changwen, a well-regarded critic in the Qing dynasty (1616–1912), wrote, “When critiquing calligraphy, especially calligraphic styles, the ancients preferred the use of analogies. Everything in the world, all phenomena between heaven and earth, can be compared with calligraphy ... The language is highly ornate, the imagination outlandish. Wrecking his brain, the reader, as if being shrouded in clouds and fog, has a hard time figuring out the exact look of the piece under discussion.”<sup>28</sup>

Such a metaphorical language, although necessary as judging calligraphy is such a tricky business, is clearly insufficient. Therefore, it is not surprising that non-aesthetic considerations found their way into the process in traditional calligraphy criticism. Critiquing a person’s moral character, while assessing his or her work, was a common practice from the very beginning of calligraphy criticism but became dominant in the Song dynasty. Inherent in this approach is the Chinese belief in the notion of “unity between nature and man” (*tian ren he yi*), which, when applied to calligraphy, indicates that nature, art, and artist are

interconnected. When his emperor sought his advice on calligraphy, Liu Gongquan made the following reply: “When the mind is at the right place, so is the brush” (*xin zheng ze bi zheng*).<sup>29</sup> While Liu’s advice could be construed as a surreptitious political admonishment, Xiang Mu was clearly making a direct correlation between a man and his work when he wrote centuries later, “Only when the calligrapher is a moral person, can his work be considered proper” (*ren zheng ze shu zheng*).<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that a person’s physical appearance, unlike his moral character, does not correspond to the quality of his calligraphic work. The work of Ouyang Xun, a man of unappealing looks, was seen as “having the right consistency, not too thin, nor too thick, strong and unbendable, with the moral fiber of a righteous official in charge of defending the law in the face of criticism from the imperial court.”<sup>31</sup> Hypothetically, if Ouyang Xun’s moral character had been tarnished, critics would most likely have offered a drastically different judgment on his calligraphy, one that would have made convenient references to his physical imperfections.

Su Shi put his finger on this Confucian criterion, “When the ancients judged calligraphers, they also talked about their lives. An immoral person’s calligraphy was not valued, even if it could be good. . . . There are handsome and ugly people, but it is impossible to hide one’s true bearing, whether a gentleman or a villain. Some are good at debate; others stammer. But the air of a gentleman or a villain cannot be faked. There is good or bad calligraphy, but we do not confuse the heart of a gentleman with that of a villain.”<sup>32</sup> No wonder Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), widely considered the greatest calligrapher and painter of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), who served the Mongols after the Song had collapsed, received disapproving reviews from later scholars who denigrated his calligraphy. Xiang Mu offered a typical critique: “Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphy is gentle and graceful, seemingly inherited from Youjun. But it is nimble and soft, lacking moral fortitude, same as in his decision to serve the Mongols despite being a descendant of the Song imperial family.”<sup>33</sup> Xiang recognized the obvious affinity between Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphy and that of Wang Xizhi (Youjun), whom he admired immensely. Nevertheless, he still considered Zhao’s calligraphy unworthy of being emulated, an opinion based more on Zhao’s political choice rather than his art.

In modern critical parlance, there is an absence of such extravagant metaphorical language; gone also is the assertion of a direct correlation between the artists’ moral character and the value of their art. Although modern critical language is almost exclusively focused on the work, considerations of the artist’s inner quality are still at work. Terms such as “divine” (*shen*), “heart” (*xin*), “energy” (*qi*), and “tonality” (*yun*) are still very present in modern calligraphy criticism. Take for example the following critiques on the work of Wang Dongling, an influential contemporary calligrapher: “The beating of his heart and the movement of his strokes are beautifully synchronized; a perfect harmony between the two is reached”; “Wang Dongling’s calligraphy, especially his large work, possesses a grandness and majesty, a general sense of poetic charm”; “His work is abstract and symbolic,” “fluid and naturally structured”; “What I see in Wang’s work are movements of rhythm, lines of spirituality.”<sup>34</sup> Commenting on Wang’s public performances of writing large characters, another critic calls his calligraphy “works created with his body temperature,” the products of “the artist breathing with the audience,” and he expresses admiration for the artist’s “great spirit and magic,” “great ambition and energy,” and “great wisdom and wit.”<sup>35</sup> The direct link between the art and the artist, without the moralistic judgment, apparently remains a very important element in appreciating calligraphy. In this line of thought, calligraphy is still seen as a personalized art, created spontaneously by a trained individual whose inner forces are actively engaged in the process of creation, and the viewer is able to see these spiritual elements in full display while a work is being created as well as in the final product.

When examining the development of calligraphy in the post-Mao era, we notice the strong resilience of this quintessentially Chinese art and the impact it has on contemporary Chinese life, shown in both the number of people who practice it and the way modern critical language retains some of its most important aesthetic principles. Although calligraphy has lost its traditional environment, it has adapted to new realities. As traditional genres take root in higher learning and popular movement, unconventional styles that are influenced by postmodern trends have emerged. With its ability to self-evolve and self-recreate, Chinese calligraphy is positioned to survive the changes of modernity and to continue to occupy a niche in Chinese society. But it is unlikely that we will see works such as Wang Xizhi's "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection" (*Lan ting ji xu*) or Yan Zhenqing's "Draft of the Elegy for My Nephew" (*Ji zhi wengao*), masterpieces spontaneously completed in a cultural milieu in which writing with the brush was an inseparable part of the Chinese artistic, intellectual, and personal life.

#### NOTES

1. Chiang Yee, *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 107.
2. The period from the Wei (220–265) and Jin (265–420) to the Tang dynasties (618–907) is considered seminal in establishing the major genres of Chinese calligraphy. For a thorough treatment of this period and beyond, see Ouyang Zhongshi and Wen C. Fong, eds., *Chinese Calligraphy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
3. In China, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably without attention paid to their historical and theoretical implications.
4. Wang Yuechuan, a professor of Beijing University, is highly critical of some Chinese avant-garde, postmodern artists for catering to Western tastes and values. He blames the "visual violence" brought by the so-called installation calligraphy or performance calligraphy for causing "a crisis in spiritual ecology" of calligraphy art. He views Xu Bing's English "calligraphy" as something made more for the artist's livelihood than for the development of Chinese calligraphy. See his book, *The Cultural Spirit of Calligraphy* (Shufa wenhua jingshen) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2008), 215, 228–29.
5. Wang Nanming, "Why Do I Continue to Make Modern Calligraphy?" (Wo weishenme yao jianchi xiandai shufa) *Dangdaishufa*, <http://9610.com/dangdai/10/wangnanming/1.htm> (March 12, 2012); and his book, *Understanding Modern Calligraphy: Transition of Calligraphy in the Direction of Modern and Avant-garde Art* (Li jie xiandai shufa: shufa xiang xiandai he qianwei yishu zhuanxing) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press, 1994).
6. See the interview with Lin Hwai-min about his work "Water Stains on the Wall" on the eve of its Ann Arbor debut. *Youtube*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_HKozu3kiI94](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HKozu3kiI94) (uploaded by UMSVideos on October 21, 2011).
7. Yang Xin, "Collection of Names of Famous Calligraphers since Ancient Times" (Cai gu lai neng shu ren ming), in Pan Yungao, ed., *Calligraphy and Painting Criticism of Han, Wei and Six Dynasties* (Han Wei Liu Chao shuhua lun) (Changsha: Hunan Art Press, 2006), 121–22.
8. Wei Shuo, "Illustrations of Brush Stroke Strategies" (Bi zhen tu), in Mao Wanbao and Huang Jun, eds., *Categorized Commentaries on Calligraphy in Ancient China* (Zhongguo gudai shu lun lei bian) (Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2009), 195–96.
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