7 Art from Calligraphy

Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images, Performative Actions, Design Products and Graffiti Works

Adriana Iezzi

Introduction

> In China, anything which can claim to be a work of art has some connection, obvious or subtle, with calligraphy.
>
> Chiang (1973, 239)

'Calligraphy' (*shufa* 书法) has always been a central tenet of Chinese civilization and 'the chief of all the arts' (Chiang 1973, 239). In China, it is much more than the art of producing beautiful writings by hand, but it represents one of the most important art forms that have been practiced and appreciated in China from ancient times until now. It was one of the so called 'three perfections' (*sanjiue* 三绝), together with painting and poetry, the art forms that every educated official in China was expected to master in the past (Sullivan 1974) and one of the four traditional skills that cultivate the minds of the literati (Li 2009, 1).[1] Owing to its strict connection with the literary tradition and the classical writings, calligraphy has consistently contributed to the continuity of Chinese artistic and cultural tradition for about one and half millennia. Being based on the Chinese characters, a fundamental identity factor for the Chinese that retraces the whole history of China,[2] it is an art that is strictly linked with the notion of national, cultural, and personal identity (Pellat, Liu, and Chen 2014, 29). Being closely connected to a logographic writing system, it has an aesthetic characterization and ornamental beauty that no other writing system possesses. Most of the characters, in fact, are indeed graphs, but originally they were drawings, images, which therefore easily lent to creative artistic manipulation. Because the content of each calligraphic work is a meaningful text, in each calligraphy the artistic expression and linguistic communication perfectly match and blend into each other, configuring calligraphy as the maximum vehicle of self-expression for Chinese artists.

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From a philosophical point of view, calligraphy is a means of representation of the universal dynamism as a reflection of the 'flowing energy' (*qi* 气) that permeates not only the macrocosm but also the natural microcosm and the human body (Liu 2000).[3] Calligraphy also affects the political and social sphere, representing a political instrument of social control and an implement of social cohesion for the political and cultural élite of the Chinese literati in imperial China (Ledderose 1986), an emblem of the ruling class and its authorities (Kraus 1991) and a sign of power, personality, authority, glamour, and national belongings for today's cultural economic élite (Yen 2005, 15–32).

Another characteristic of Chinese calligraphy is the powerful and extremely coherent tradition of its practice:[4] from the fourth century onwards, classical models were canonized, and aesthetics and stylistic standards were established so that traditional calligraphies seem to all be very similar to an untrained eye.[5] It was only by the end of the nineteenth century that the impressive stability and cohesiveness of this art began to fade (Xue 1998), and in contemporary times, in particular from the mid-1980s, thanks to the uneven growth of the new commercial economy and the new politics of the Communist Party, which 're-opened' China to the rest of the world and to a free confrontation with its past tradition, calligraphy has undergone a radical change and exploded into a plethora of different forms in all fields of visual and performing arts, entering the international contemporary art arena (Iezzi 2013a). Calligraphy has been contaminated by other artistic forms, modifying its rigid rules, forms, tools, materials, aesthetic canons, and conceptions, sometimes even being unrecognizable. In this context, Chinese writing turns into pictorial images, performative actions, design products, and even graffiti works.

Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images

The first examples of innovative ways to use Chinese calligraphy in contemporary artworks are those in which Chinese writing turns into 'pictorial images'. This means first the rework of Chinese characters based on their pictographic forms so that they do not seem to be characters anymore but primitive and stylized images of what they represent, such as animals, objects, and persons. This is possible because 'many early written signs in Chinese originated from sketches of objects, thus they bore a physical resemblance to the object they represented, like pictures, which is why they were called pictographs' (Li 2009, 75).

An example is the work entitled '**Horses**' *Ma* 马 (1990, Figure 7.1) by **Gu Gan** 古干 (1942–2020), one of the first Chinese artists who experimented with new forms of calligraphy starting from the mid-1980s. In this oeuvre, the artist wrote the character *ma* 马 (horse) several times, using

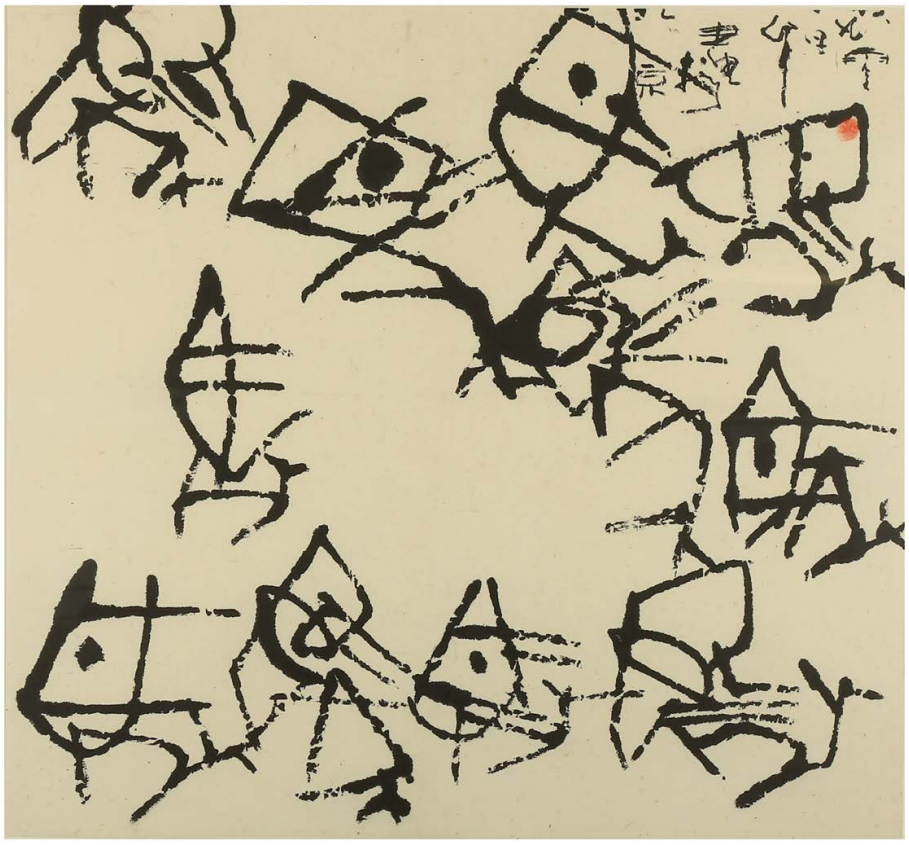

Figure 7.1 Gu Gan, *Horses*, 1990, ink on rice paper, 70 × 66 cm. Courtesy of the author.

its pictographic forms, and arranged the 11 pictographic versions of the character[6] freely on the sheet of paper in order to recreate the pacey movement of a herd of horses. As a result, the viewer can appreciate the naïf representation of the primitive fears, even if does not know that they are actually Chinese characters.[7]

Using a similar conception, **Luo Qi** 洛齐 (b. 1960), another leading figure in the panorama of the modernization of Chinese calligraphy, from 2004 to 2009, created three different series of artworks in ink and color on paper entitled '**Godbird Series**' (*Shenniao xilie* 神鸟系列, Figure 7.2), '**Godfish Series**' (*Shenyu xilie* 神鱼系列) and '**Flying Fish Series**' (*Feiyu xilie* 飞鱼系列) reworking the ancient pictographic forms of the characters *niao* 鸟 (bird) and *yu* 鱼 (fish) with an increasingly greater degree of abstraction.

In the first artworks of these series, the analogy with the pictographic forms of the related character is very strong, but then it becomes increasingly tenuous in favor of a greater resemblance to the real images of birds and fish or to their conventional way of being drawn. In the last examples, they turn into compositions of lines that only vaguely recall the shapes of

Figure 7.2 Luo Qi, *Godbird Series*, 2004–2007, ink and color on paper, 68 × 68 cm (each). Courtesy of the author.

birds and fishes.[8] Furthermore, in the last series, the 'Flying Fish Series', inaugurated in 2009 and composed of 38 works, the artist fused together the ideas of the first two series in the new concept of 'flying fishes' (*feiyu* 飞鱼) that are fantastic creatures who blend together the characteristics of the fishes and birds painted previously, adding conventional elements and shapes such as hearts, crosses, dots, flowers, triangles, etc. In these three series, there is a fusion between different levels of representation: the archaic forms of the characters, the stylized drawings of real images, the linear abstraction, and the rework of conventional elements. The aim is to connect these various levels in order to create a new language that gives infinite possibilities of representation of the same subject. This is the idea of 'combinatorial and asymmetric modularity'[9] which characterizes much of Luo Qi's artistic production and can be found in two other series based on the rework of Chinese archaic characters named 'Love Writings' (*Qingshu* 情书, 1990–2002)[10] and 'Sound Images' (*Shengyin de tuxiang* 声音的图像, 2023). In these two series, Luo Qi created a childish, archaic drawing writing, in which the characters have been heavily reshaped and contaminated with simple figurative elements. This non-formalized 'writing' is no longer linguistically readable, but visually appreciable, opening itself to universal aesthetic enjoyment.

The 'pictographic' approach used by Gu Gan and Luo Qi was transported to the third dimension by **Xu Bing** 徐冰 (b. 1955), another

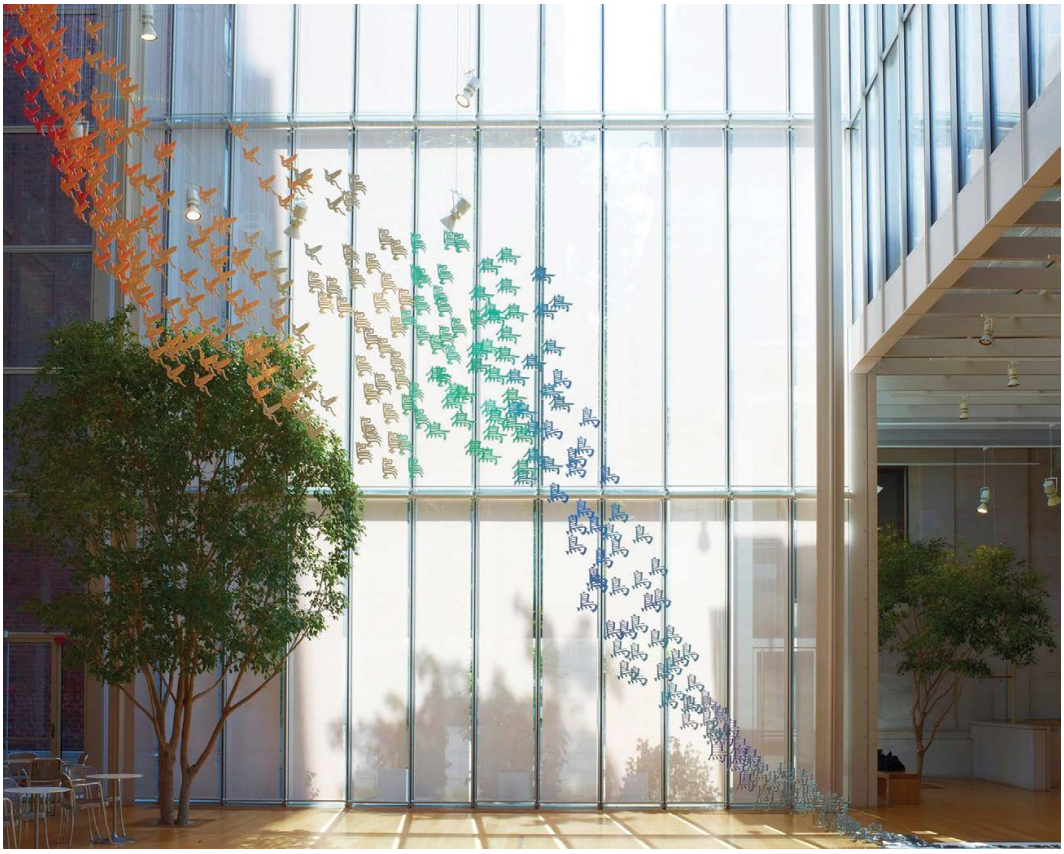

Figure 7.3 Xu Bing, *The Living Word*, 2011, installation, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. © Xu Bing Studio.

revolutionary artist in the field of contemporary calligraphy, in an extremely suggestive installation called '**The Living Word**' (*Niao fei le* 鸟飞了, 2001, Figure 7.3).

This is an installation composed of a series of plexiglass cutouts of the various forms of the character *niao* 鸟 (bird), from the most ancient form in 'oracle bone script' (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文) to the modern standard, in which each form is rendered with a different color.[11] The character hovers from a platform placed on the ground, with the transcription of the dictionary definition of the word *niao* (bird), breaking away from the confines of the literal definition and taking flight through the installation space. Rising into the air, the character gradually changes from its simplified modern form to non-simplified traditional forms written in different calligraphic styles, and finally to the ancient Chinese pictograph for 'bird'. The flight of this character is a journey back in time and space that retraces the whole history of Chinese writing from its roots. Its rainbow colors create a magical and fairy-tale quality. This installation is a flying 'flock of birds' and at the same time an 'animated writing': the linguistic sign frees itself from the preceptive constraints of writing to transform itself into something else,

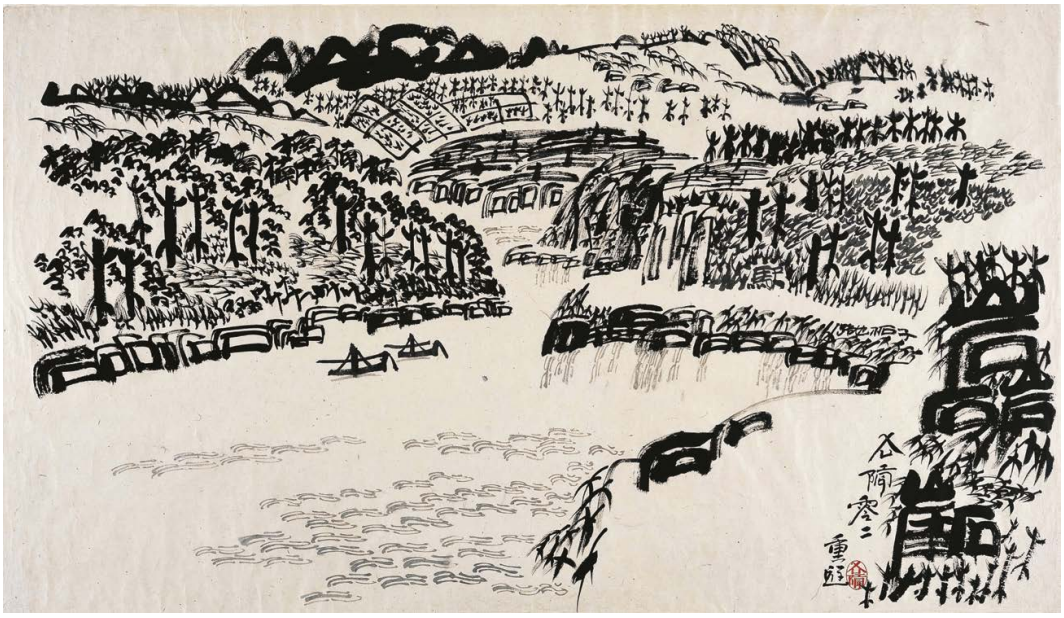

Figure 7.4 Xu Bing, *Landscript*, 2002, ink on paper, 99.5 × 174 cm. © Xu Bing Studio.

into something more alive and truer, and it does so simply by recovering its original form. It is a game made possible only thanks to the formal evolution of Chinese writing which, thanks to its peculiarities, and in particular to its pictographic nature, can come back to life.

In another series by Xu Bing entitled '**Landscript/Read View**' (*Wenzi xiesheng* 文字写生/*Du fengjing* 读风景, 1999–ongoing, Figure 7.4), the artist used Chinese characters as pictorial elements to arrange landscape paintings. In this way, characters for 'stone' (*shi* 石) make up images of rocks; the character for 'tree' (*mu* 木) makes up trees; the character for 'grass' (*cao* 艸) grass, for 'leaves' (*ye* 叶) leaves, for 'clouds' (*yun* 云) clouds, and so on. The characters that vary from regular and cursive scripts to simplified forms as well as such archaic forms as bronze and oracle-bone scripts are the ones he uses the most because of their pictographic value. In this series, started in 1999 when the artist went to the Himalayas sketching natural 'scenes' with Chinese characters, Xu Bing transforms visual images of landscapes into linguistic forms, inviting the viewers to reassess the distinctiveness of Chinese culture hidden within traditional landscape paintings, and offers a unique approach to 'read a scene'.[12] Chinese characters, becoming pictorial elements, regain their value as semantic elements.

Another artist of the calligraphic avant-garde who also focuses on the creative re-elaboration of the pictographic sign is **Pu Lieping** 濮列平 (b. 1959). In some of his works, for examples, he intersected pictograms, rewriting them repeatedly in an increasingly creative way in order to create organic compositions of great liveliness and calligraphic vividness.[13] In

Figure 7.5 Pu Lieping, *Knowing and doing,* 2011, ink and colors on paper, 65 × 65 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

another set of artworks (Figure 7.5), Pu Lieping refers to a particular form of seal script called 'bird seal script' (*niao zhuan* 鸟篆) that is a kind of artistic script in common use during the late Warring States period (475–221 BC), characterized by avian elaborations decorating each character. In this script 'the lines are gently and intricately curved and decorated with bird design' (Ouyang and Fong 2008, 85), the strokes are replaced by bird shapes, and the writing possesses a unique decorative style. Taking inspiration from this particular script in the artwork '**Knowing and doing**' (*Zhixing* 知行, Figure 7.5), Pu Lieping transcribes the two characters of the title, transforming the strokes of each character into heads of birds, bodies of fishes, profiles of horses, swimming turtles, flower stems, and corollas, depicting an imaginative natural scenario that seems to have nothing to do with Chinese characters.

All the artworks analyzed above are examples of what can be defined as 'pictorial calligraphy' (*huihua shufa* 绘画书法) or 'pictographic calligraphy' (*xiangxing shufa* 象形书法),[14] a form of visual (ri)elaboration of Chinese characters based on their pictographic forms, sometimes incorporating the use of colors. The first important examples of this type of calligraphy date back to the **'First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy'** (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa shouzhan* 中国现代书法首展), held in October 1985 at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing, which represents the birth of 'Chinese Modern Calligraphy' (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa* 中国现代书法)[15] and of the Modernist calligraphic movement.[16] The 72 artworks displayed were neither calligraphies nor paintings (Liu 2000, 33), but they were something that participated both in calligraphy practice and painting conceptions.[17]Among them, there are several calligraphies composed of pictographic forms, such as *Tiandao chou qin* 天道酬勤 ('God help those who help themselves', 1985) by Li Luogong 李骆公 (1917–1992), a forerunner in the use of pictographic forms,[18] and *Jia shan ting yu* 家山听雨 ('From my refuge in the mountains I hear the tinkling of the rain', 1985) by Huang Miaozi 黄苗子 (1913–2012), another leading figure of the modernist calligraphic movement. There are also artworks in which the pictographic characters create real visual images, such as *Buxing* 步行 ('Walking', 1985) by Ma Chengxiang 马承祥 (b. 1937), composed of the two characters of the title '步' and '行' reproduced in their bronze script forms which consist of two footsteps  at the intersection of four roads ; *Chun* 春 ('Spring', 1985) by Zou Hanqiao 左汉桥 (b. 1946), in which the character '春' is reworked starting from its seal form  , which represents 'vegetation' *cao* 艸 reviving under the influence of the 'sun' *ri* 日; and, finally, *Yue zhou* 月舟 ('Moon and boat', 1985) by Xu Futong 许福同 (b. 1944) in which the two characters of the title in bronze script ( and ) compose a night seascape. As demonstrated in these last examples, a 'pictorial approach' to calligraphy not only means the use of pictographic characters but also a new disposal of the characters in the composition as elements of a painting. The most representative example in that sense shown in this exhibition was the artwork entitled *Li Bai shi* 李白诗 ('Li Bai's poem', 1985) by Su Yuanzhang 苏元章 (1924–2002). In this oeuvre the artist transcribes a poem by Li Bai, China's most famous poet, using calligraphic forms and characters disposition to mimic the forms of the landscape painting described in the poem[19] so that 'the image, essentially pictorial in structure, is organically united with that of the poem' (Zhang 1998, 15).

Starting from these first experiments, there are many artists who have continued this type of research,[20] like those mentioned above, and many others who opened new paths for experimentation, (1) turning calligraphy towards abstract art with artworks focused on the expressiveness of the calligraphic line, but where Chinese characters are no longer recognizable,[21]

(2) using new tools, from a corn broom to an augmented reality headset with related touch controllers,[22] (3) using new supports/materials to create mixed media or multimedia artworks, from calligraphic collages and combining paintings to digital works.[23]

The use of **digital art** applied to 'pictographic calligraphy' was indeed pioneering in the history of Chinese contemporary experimentation and goes beyond national boundaries. The first example of 'pictographic calligraphy' in digital form was in fact the cartoon titled 'Thirty-six Characters' *Sanshiliu ge zi* 三十六个字, designed in 1984, one year before the First Exhibition of Modern Calligraphy, telling a story using 36 movable pictograms shaping in calligraphic forms.[24] The transposition of pictographic calligraphy in digital form was moreover the source of inspiration of an artwork titled 'Passo 1' (Path n. 1, 2018) made by a foreign artist, the Italian Guido Ballatori (b. 1983), who edited a video (the digitalization of a paper flipbook) in which the artist creatively animates the two characters *Mo* 墨 'ink' and *Yue* 樂 'music', the title of the exhibition in which the work was exhibited,[25] taking inspiration from the pictographic form of the component parts of the characters and creating a story.[26] Another important experiment in that sense was the animation "The Character of Characters" (*Wenzi de xingge* 汉字的性格) by Xu Bing, a video commissioned by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 2012 inspired by a calligraphy masterpiece by Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254–1322). In this video, calligraphy strokes were transformed into figurative elements, characters became visual signs, calligraphic practices and conceptions were transposed into stories, and also the similarities between painting and calligraphy were embodied into animated symbols.[27]

As declared by Liu Zijian (1999):

> Early works of modern calligraphy, such as the works of artists like Gu Gan and Li Luogong, demonstrated a tendency to simulate painting by trying to symbolize Chinese characters. People feel a certain element of freshness in such works because they look more like paintings. […] The purpose is to seek visual effects and weaken the recognizability of calligraphy. Traditional calligraphy as a complete writing system has its inaccessible classical nature, which is already impossible to be repeated in a changed cultural context. Calligraphy can be a live source for new art only when it suspends the consistent thinking that writing and recognizability of characters are essential in calligraphy, and rather chooses to develop towards visual art and seek roads beyond the edges of traditional calligraphy.

Starting from being something to refresh Chinese calligraphy from within, 'pictorial/pictographic calligraphy' makes Chinese calligraphy not

only easier to read and more accessible to a wider audience but even more easily usable abroad, still referring to something extremely identifying: the pictographic nature of Chinese writing. The eternal struggle between 'local' and 'global' that characterized the recent history of contemporary Chinese calligraphy seems to be resolved in a glocalization perspective (Wu 2008) with reversed roles in which it is the local that acts on the global.

Chinese Writing Turns into Performative Actions

The use of calligraphy in contemporary artworks goes beyond the production of material visual artworks but results also in performative actions, such as artistic performances, contemporary dance ballets, and musical executions. Calligraphy shares the idea of rhythm, dynamism, and harmony with these art forms. In writing practice, in fact, the artist manipulates and elaborates on the balance between opposites, a reference to the Daoist philosophy of *yin* and *yang*, emphasizing diversity within parts and the harmony of the whole, creating the rhythm of movement and generating an innate flowing vitality so that 'the beauty of Chinese calligraphy is essentially the beauty of plastic movement, like the coordinated movements of a skillfully composed dance' (Li 2009, 179).

The most famous example of the use of calligraphy in a **contemporary performance** is Zhang Huan's **'Family Tree'** *Jiapu* 家谱 (2000, Figure 7.6).

In this performance, **Zhang Huan** 張洹 (b. 1965) invites three calligraphers to write words and phrases on his face. He tells them what they should write and to always keep a serious attitude when writing the texts even when his face turns dark. His face follows the daylight till it slowly darkens. At the end, his identity disappears. Most of these words and phrases derive from the ancient Chinese art of physiognomy, which seeks to map personality traits and divine the future based on one's facial features and/or cultural or political associations, such as the four characters on his forehead that refer to a well-known fable often invoked by Mao Zedong entitled, 'The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountain' (*Yugong-yishan* 愚公移山).[28] But rather than elucidate Zhang's character and fate, these traditional divinatory marks ultimately obscure his identity beneath a dense layer of culturally conditioned references. Because both his body and mind have been conditioned by his race and his upbringing, Zhang's autonomy as an individual is constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by his heritage (Hearn 2014, 66). Words and calligraphy, instead of helping the artist to know better himself and its culture, obscure his identity and are means of personal and cultural disorientation.[29]

This performance is directly linked by another famous work by **Qiu Zhijie** 邱志杰 (b. 1969), a leading figure of the contemporary calligraphic movement, titled '**Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface a Thousand Times**'

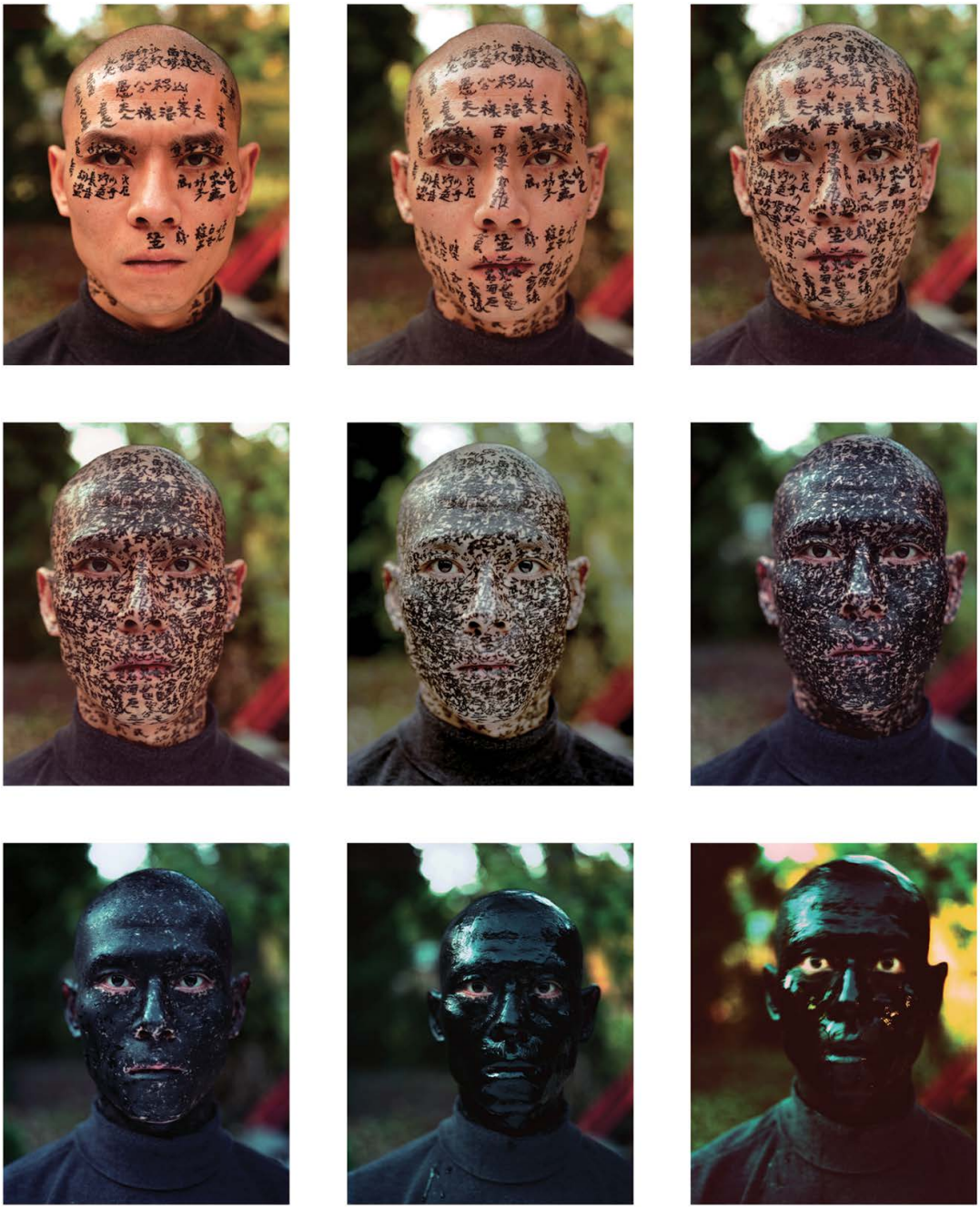

Figure 7.6 Zhang Huan, *Family Tree*, 2000, 9 photos of the performance, 224 × 175 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

(Chongfu shuxie yi qian bian Lantingxu 重复书写一千遍兰亭序, 1990–1995, Figure 7.7).

The 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' is the most famous calligraphic piece of the Chinese history, written in 353 by Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), the father of Chinese calligraphy, and it has been copied repeatedly by all those who wish to learn the rudiments of calligraphic art. To denounce

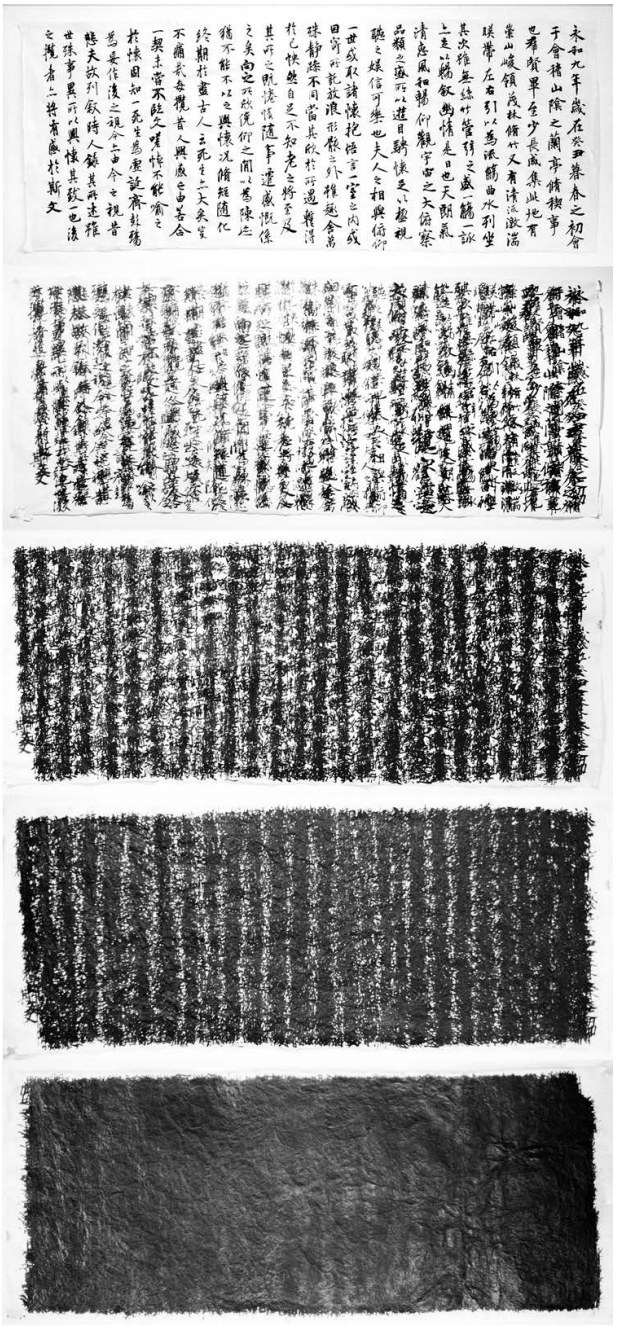

Figure 7.7 Qiu Zhijie, *Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface a Thousand Times*, 1990–1995, five chromogenetic prints, 49 × 99 cm (each). Courtesy of the artist.

the senselessness of the calligraphy teaching method, based on the slavish reiteration of what already exists, which completely kills any form of individual creativity and expressiveness, Qiu Zhijie decided to dedicate three years of his life to copying this work, repeating the operation a thousand times on the same sheet of paper and documenting his work through a video. By continuing to overwrite, even once the surface was completely

blackened, Qiu Zhijie arrived at the total annihilation of the work. Calligraphy so becomes a metaphor for social orthodoxy and cultural reproduction, reducing culture to a mere mechanical practice, in which there is no possibility of criticism and renewal.[30]

There are also two female artists who took inspiration from Qiu Zhijie's performance, Ni Li 倪立 (b. 1989) and Wu Xixia 吴析夏 (b. 1993). On April 28, 2018, during the finissage of the exhibition 'The Music of Ink' held at the Braidense National Library in Milan (21 March – 28 April 2018), **Ni Li** held a performance entitled **'Calligraphy and Thousand Character Classic Thousand Character Classic'** (Figure 7.8) that consisted of the repetitive writing of another classic of Chinese calligraphic tradition, the 'Thousand Character Classic' (*Qianzi wen* 千字文)[31], on a big white panel until its surface was completely blackened by the calligraphic strokes.

Otherwise, in 2021 in Macau **Wu Xixia** held a performance entitled '**Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Time**' (*Shuxie Lanting xu yibian* 书写兰亭序一遍). She entered in an airtight inflatable sphere that symbolizes the uterus and begins to write the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' replacing the different forms of the twenty *zhi* 之 characters present in the poem with red-ink male phalluses. During the writing process, the oxygen inside the sphere is gradually depleted, infusing it with carbon dioxide. Just before suffocating, the artist will ask for help to get out of the sphere.[32]

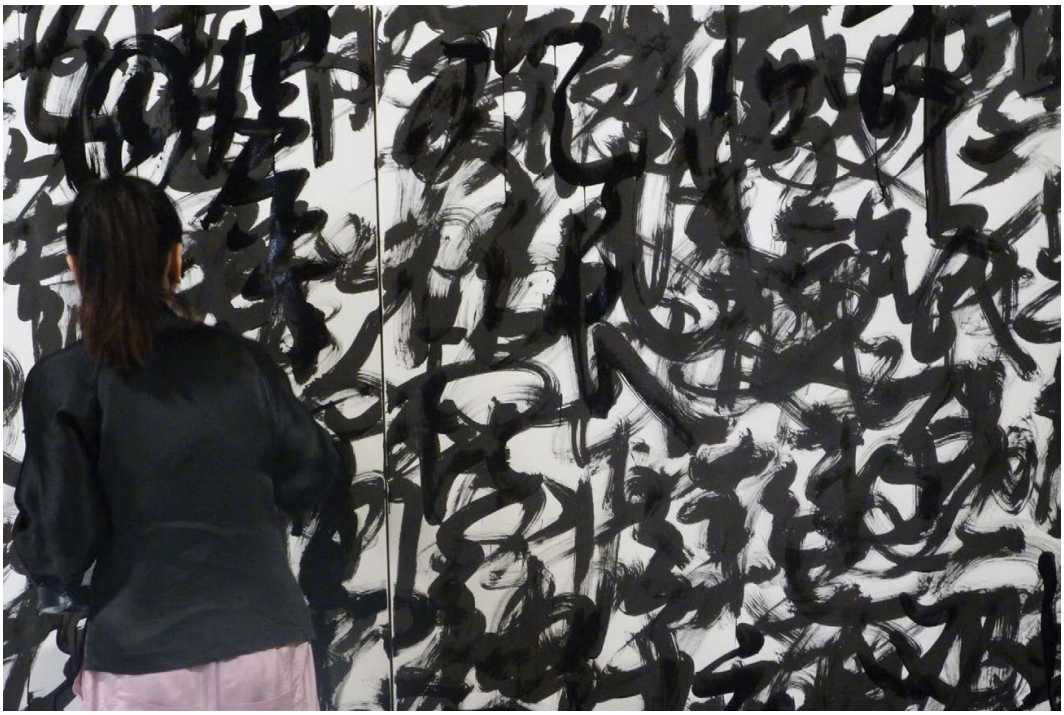

Figure 7.8 Ni Li, *Calligraphy and Thousand Character Classic Thousand Character Classic*, photograph of the performance, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

In both performances, a mechanism of reapproval of the calligraphic tradition, characterized by masculine supremacy, is put into action by the female counterpart. In the first example, there is the denunciation of a dull tradition based on the mechanical and repetitive gesture; in the second case there is the open denunciation of a patriarchal and chauvinist culture symbolized by calligraphy and in particular by 之 *zhi* character, which has deprived women of any possibility of self-expression.

The four performances are all attempts to deconstruct the calligraphic tradition,[33] and in particular, the first three are example of the so-called 'anti-calligraphy' (Jiang and Wang 2005; Qian 2000; Qu 2008[34]; Zhang 1999) because they produce a subversion of traditional calligraphy and a sort of negation of it.[35] They can be defined as a form of 'blackened calligraphy' or 'performance of blackened calligraphy'.

Starting from the assumption that calligraphy is 'the dance of the wrist and the ink' and its aesthetic is directly linked to the conception of the 'physical execution' of harmonic movements (Kao 1991, 74–83), calligraphy has also become the source of inspiration for Chinese **contemporary dance** companies, choreographers, and dancers.[36] The most important example is '**Cursive: A Trilogy**' *Xingcao sanbuqu* 行草三部曲 (2001–2005, Figure 7.9) by the **Cloud Dance Theatre of Taiwan** (*Yumen wuji* 云门舞集), a dance company funded by Lin Hwai-min 林怀民 (b. 1947) in Taipei in 1973. The trilogy is composed of three different ballets: 'Cursive' *Xingcao* 行草 (2001, Figure 7.9), 'Cursive II' *Xingcao er* 行草二 (2003)[37] renamed 'Pine Smoke' (*Song yan* 松煙) in 2012, and 'Wild Cursive' *Kuangcao* 狂草 (2005). [38] This cycle focuses on the cursive style of calligraphy, known for its swirling and surprising nature. Its meandering, energetic, and flexible lines shift between continuous and compact to disconnected and loose ones, marked by its sudden and unpredictable variations, with its dynamic and easy movements, it resembles the representation of an overwhelming dance captured on paper, which is precisely what it turns into. What the choreographer wants to capture, in fact, is 'the concentrated energy with which the calligraphers "danced" while they were writing', that he recognized as a 'common element' of all the masterpieces of Chinese calligraphy (Schmidt 2006).

In *Cursive I* (Figure 7.9), the dancers experience the kinetic energy arising during the act of writing and follow the diverse ink flows. Following the energy assimilated from the traditional calligraphies projected on the stage, the dancers try to reproduce with their movements the dynamism of calligraphic lines, to animate the written signs and to mimic the dialectic of *yin* and *yang* and the harmony that arises therein.[39] The movements of the dancers' bodies all originate from the inside out, just like calligraphy, which emphasizes the movement of the brush in contact with the air, leaving empty spaces around. Also, the music composed by the internationally renowned composer Qu Xiaosong 瞿小松 (b. 1952), in which several drums contrast to a single cello, is full of empty spaces to merge

Figure 7.9 Cloud Gate Theatre of Taiwan, *Cursive I*, 2001. The dancer Chou Chang-ning moves her body in front of the calligraphy *Pan* 磐 (hard stone) by Tong Yang-tze. (Photo by Liu Chen-hsiang. Courtesy of the dance company.)

calligraphy and dance movement into a unique flow. Like ink on rice paper, the dancers wear black costumes and perform on a white stage. The fusion with contemporary calligraphy materializes in the ninth of the ten chapters of the ballet when the dancer moves in front of a panel with the character *pan* 磐 (hard stone) written in cursive script by the famous female contemporary calligrapher Tong Yang-Tze 董陽孜 (b. 1942) (Figure 7.9). The dancer is wearing a long black dress with 510-cm long sleeves (a reference to Chinese opera) and moves the heavy, long sleeves to evoke weightlessness, like a 'flying dragon and a dancing phoenix' (*long fei feng wu* 龙飞凤舞)[40] moving like a brush on the soft rice paper.

In *Cursive II*, the reflection is on the 'colors' of calligraphy, on the five different shades of black ink that can be identified in calligraphic artworks, and in particular with the lighter nuances of color found in this artform. The choreographer himself paints with the bodies of the dancers on the background of enlarged sections of photos of white porcelain from the Song dynasty (960–1279) and on the notes and long silences of the 'Asian period' of John Cage's experimental music.

The aesthetic and lyrical abstraction already very present in *Cursive II* becomes even more evident in *Wild Cursive,* a hymn to movement improvisation and free expression, which are the elements from which the wild cursive calligraphic form arose. This loose, unrestrained, and extemporaneous script arose in fact from the hands of two extraordinary performers, Zhang Xu (675–750?) and Huai Su (737–789), the first two Chinese calligraphers who turned calligraphy into a dancing performing action, inspired by Madame Gongsun's Sword Dance. In Lin Hwai-min's choreography, on the background made of strips of white rice paper stained by signs and drops of black ink during the performative action, the dancers dressed in black move their bodies freely as powerful brushes that create wild cursive calligraphy on the notes of music composed by the young Taiwanese composers Jim Chum and Liang Chun-ma, which largely consists of hard drumbeats and wind noises.

The strict correlation between **music** and calligraphic principles[41] has also influenced the artistic activities of composers inspired by the calligraphic gestures, calligraphers who conform their artistic conception to music principles, and both musicians and calligraphers who work together in the so-called 'musicalligraphy performances'. The first example of a contemporary composer inspired by calligraphy is the Sino-American **Chou Wen-chung** 周文中 (1923–2019), who in 1964 composed the classical piece entitled '**Cursive**' [42] inspired by cursive style. As he explained:

> Cursive refers to the type of script in which the joined strokes and rounded angles result in expressive and contrasting curves and loops [and musically the cursive concept influences] the use of specified but indefinite pitches and rhythm, regulated but variable tempo and dynamics, as well as various timbres possible on the two instruments [I used in the composition, the piano and the flute]. The piano serves as reflection of the flute by "extending" its range into the lower register and by matching the flute's varied timbral resources, such as microtonal trills and flutter tonguing, using plucked piano strings and foreign materials between these strings.[43]

A more recent example is the musical piece '**Song of Ink**' (2022) by the Chinese composer **Chen Yeung-ping** 陳仰平 (b. 1983). It is a piece for

flute, violin, *qin*, *pipa*, and piano, inspired by a set of monumental calligraphies[44] displayed in the Main Hall at M+ (a contemporary art museum in Hong Kong). The five calligraphies were made by Tong Yang-tze in 2020 for the opening of the museum and conceived as a sort of site-specific installation; they are written in a mix of running and regular scripts in an extremely free and dynamic disposal arrangement, typical of the artist's style. The text of the five pieces is: 'the movement of heaven is powerful' (*tian xing jian* 天行健), 'renew oneself daily' (*ri xin* 日新), 'delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order' (*le tian zhi ming* 樂天知命), 'at the auspicious moment, act without delay' (*jian ji er zuo* 見機而作), and 'embracing the way of heaven brings progress' (*he tian zhi qu, Dao da xing ye* 何天之衢, 道大行也). These expressions are excerpts from the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*)[45] and aim to open the viewer's mind to philosophical reflection on the meaning of human life, world existence, and the relationship between human and Heaven. The musical piece is also divided into five sections that represent the personal response of the composer to the texts of calligraphy. The five sections are 'Heaven' (*Tian* 天), 'Human' (*Ren* 人), 'Self-awareness' (*Zizhi* 自知), 'Overcome ego' (*Zi sheng*自勝), and 'Unity' (*Heyi* 合一). As he said:

> Calligraphy is like music; its lines are what stimulate me greatly. This composition, *Song of Ink,* captures the singing qualities and dynamic of the ink I have perceived from Tong's work.[46]

This is the first example of a musical composition directly inspired by contemporary calligraphy.[47]

There are also examples in which calligraphy, music, and dance work together to create multimodal and extremely captivating **'musicalligraphy-dance performances'**. One recent example is **'Sound MAP (Musicalligraphy Augmented Performance)',**[48] a multidisciplinary performance of calligraphy, music, dance, and augmented reality that was held on 12 October 2023 at the Museo internazionale e biblioteca della musica in Bologna during the opening of the exhibition 'Sounds of Ink: Luo Qi and 30 Years of Calligraphyism' (12 October – 5 November 2023). The performance involved two calligraphers, Luo Qi and Silvio Ferragina (b. 1960), the pianist and impro-performer Giusy Caruso (b. 1976), the contemporary dancer Agnese Gabrielli (b. 1997), and the Chinese composer Zhang Zhenzhen 张桢珍 (b. 1987), with the technological support of the Milan-based firm LWT3. The performance was divided into three main parts: in the first part, starting from the silence, the pianist began to 'act' on the piano, firstly plucking the piano strings and creating distortion effects on them and then doing improvisations using both keyboard and strings; her gestures were inspired by the gestures of

the calligraphy master Luo Qi, who meanwhile wrote on a rice paper scroll sticking out of the piano the four characters of the title of the exhibition (*shuimo shengyin* 水墨声音), using his personal style. When he finished, he began to 'translate' the music into concatenations of calligraphic signs inspired by the oldest Chinese musical notation system, the 'Dunhuang music score' (*Dunhuang yuepu* 敦煌乐谱),[49] reshaping it according to his personal and original interpretation and transforming it into a 'visual and visible musical score', strongly rhythmic and dynamic, with an inextricably calligraphic thread.[50] In the second part of the performance, the pianist played the contemporary piece 'Shadows' (2012) by the Chinese composer Zhang Zhenzhen, interacting with the improvisation of the dancer who moved her body in consonance with the music rhythm and the pianist's gestures. In the last part of the performance, the Italian calligrapher Silvio Ferragina wrote the 18 characters *Fu zhi zai shan shui, qin biao qi qing, kuang xing zhi bi duan, li jiang yan ni* 夫志在山水, 琴表其情, 况形之笔端, 理将焉匿 ('If it is possible for a man's impressions of mountains and rivers to find expression in his lute playing, how much easier it must be to depict physically tangible forms with a brush, from which no inner feeling or idea can be successfully hidden'[51]) from the classical literary work entitled 'The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons' (*Wen xin diao long* 文心雕龍) by Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–522), using seal script and its pictographic forms. The text creates a similarity between music and the art of the brush which, thanks to their expressiveness, transform every type of vision, feeling, and human idea into art. The interaction between these two art forms is exactly what was acted out on stage: while the calligrapher was shaping the 18 characters on a 15-meter-long scroll placed at the center of the room, the pianist was playing a musical score (also with improvisations) that was the translation in music of the strokes of those characters. This translation follows the strict rules of a sophisticated mathematical system called 'Musicalligraphy Project' (2013–ongoing) designed by Silvio Ferragina that converts the strokes of the characters and the blank spaces between them into musical notations and pauses.[52] In this way, for the first time the calligrapher and the musician play the same 'musicalligraphic score'. In this last part of the performance, technology was also part of the action: while the calligrapher was writing, the characters he wrote were projected on a screen placed in the background of the stage. Thanks to a sensor placed on the brush, the movement of the calligrapher's wrist interacted with the projected characters that were deformed on the basis of the calligraphic gesture. The pianist also had a sensor on her wrist that modified the movement of the projected characters in accordance with her gestures, generating electronic sounds. In this performance, all the actors performed and embodied the strict correlation between Chinese

writing, gesture, music, and visuals, creating a real osmosis among calligraphy, music, and body movement, and demonstrated the creative potential of Chinese calligraphy art even through the use of augmented reality.

Chinese Writing Turns into Design Products

In contemporary times, Chinese calligraphy and writing are also systematically used in the field of decorative and applied arts due to the fascination they still have in Chinese people. Chinese characters and calligraphic lines lost their direct connection with the linguistic meaning to become decorative elements; graphic motives; captivating shapes used for commercial scope, for example on ceramics or design products, in particular graphic design, fashion design and industrial design products; and also modern architecture design.

Among all these manifestations, the use of Chinese writing and calligraphy in **logo design** is particularly interesting because it demonstrates how Chinese characters, even individually, can be easily manipulated to create something visually appealing and usable far beyond national boundaries. Among the numerous logos made of Chinese characters and reproducing the calligraphic strokes,[53] one of the most representative example is the **logo of the Paralympic Games 2008**[54] (Figure 7.10), designed by Paul Liu, a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, who applied traditional calligraphic art elements and transformed the Chinese character *zhi* '之' into a human shape in motion, implying the tremendous efforts a disabled person has to make in sports as well as in real life.

The character *zhi* '之' means 'birth, life', as well as 'arrival' and 'achievement', and in fact its shape is made of twists and turns, which implies the process of achieving goals and the life of human being. Its original form (㞢) is from *zhi* 止 'foot', with a 一 line below it, so the character also means 'to go'. Its shape in fact seems to recall that of a person with a head (the red dot), arms and torso (the blue line), and a single leg (the green line) who is running, to symbolize the paralytic condition of some of the Paralympic athletes who, despite their condition, 'go, proceed, are in continuous movement', going beyond human limit. The use of running script (*xingshu*) to shape this character accentuates this idea of movement. The whole character embodies the Paralympic motto of 'Spirit in Motion' and was dubbed 'Sky, Earth and Human Being' (*Tiandiren* 天地人) because it reflects the integration of heart, body, and spirit in human beings and of human spirit and natural world, which is the core of the philosophy of Chinese culture. The three colors in the logo in fact represent the sun (red), the sky (blue) and the earth (green), that when integrated shape the human figure. The words 'Beijing 2008' under the character are also written in a calligraphic font similar to the character *zhi* and recall the lower part of

Figure 7.10 The logo of the Paralympic Games 2008. © International Paralympic Committee.

the logo of the Beijing Olympic Games.[55] In the Olympic logo, there is also a strict correlation with Chinese writing and calligraphy: the shape of the athlete in motion resembles the character *jing* 京 'capital' in its seal script form, standing for the name of the host city (Beijing), and reproduces the typical Chinese red seal that is always composed of Chinese characters written in archaic styles and represents the artist's sign.[56]

Fashion design is another fertile ground for the interaction between calligraphy and applied arts.[57] An extremely interesting example in this field is the cross-media experiment called **'From Ink to Apparel – A Crossover between Calligraphy Art and Fashion Design',**[58] a cycle of three exhibitions organized by the calligrapher Tong Yang-tze in Taipei, in which calligraphy became the source of inspiration for talented young fashion designers. The first edition was held in 2016: for the exhibition, Tong Yang-Tze invited six up-and-coming Taiwanese fashion designers (Apu Jan, Shao-Yen Chen, Yu-Ying Chou, Kilin Chen, Shun-min Wang, and Pei Chieh Chen) to create dresses taking inspiration from twenty of the 100 calligraphies that comprised her previous exhibition, entitled 'Silent Music'.[59] In 2007

Figure 7.11 The dress collection made by Polly Ho for the exhibition 'From Ink to Apparel II' (2017). Courtesy of the artist.

she repeated the experiment involving the Hong Kong fashion designers Polly Ho and Otto Tang and the designer Yi-Fen Tsai, in addition to three veterans of the original exhibition. About the concept and realization of her collection (Figure 7.11), Polly Ho affirmed:

> My inspiration comes from Ms. Tong Yang-Tze. I tried to focus and explore her masterpieces. Tried to discover the possibilities of her brush strokes, try to make some collage from her enlarged strokes. I found out the silhouette of her strokes are so strong and complicated. To express the feeling of these complicated strokes, I cut the silk fabric with many layers eventually; each layer is coming from the line of her strokes. I applied these straps of her stroke lines, using 3D draping on the dummy to make a top. And then I applied the same technique on the rest of the outfits from simple layers to complicated layers. And I also developed a print from the collage of Ms. Tong's brush strokes, and then I printed on 3 different silk materials to express the soft and strength of the brush strokes. Moreover, we added some circular shapes and try to explore the lighting spot on the clothes to reflect the layers of the strokes in a different way.

In the last edition of 'From Ink to Apparel' in 2018, Tong Yang-tze finally invited three designers from Taiwan (Chou Yu-Ying, Chen Shao-Yen, and Tsai Yi-Fen), two from Beijing (Li Ying-Jun, and Zhou You), and one from UK (Pan Bernice) to work on a single character *wu* 無 (emptiness), written by her in different calligraphic styles, to create dress collections.

The main aim of the 'From Ink to Apparel' experiment is to make the art of calligraphy easily accessible to the general public through a language that is easily readable and extremely captivating as fashion design, closer to everyday practice and with possible commercial implications, and it is also a way to show many possibilities inherent within the calligraphic art, to show its creative potentiality in contemporary times, blending with an artform originated from the West and making sure it doesn't die.[60]

This is not the first time that calligraphers collaborated with fashion designers,[61] but is the first time that this collaboration is on large scale, involving around 20 fashion designers, generating lots of different collections for a total of around 100 dresses, attracting a very large audience[62] and abundant media attention.

Contradicting the theory of the skepticism of commercialization that usually sees commodification and commodity images as processes that degrade traditional cultural forms,[63] the application of Chinese writing and calligraphy to logo and fashion design reflects the cultural 'Chinese' connotation of the design works, transforms Chinese characters and calligraphic strokes into captivating, desired design elements, and enhances and improves Chinese design to an international level.[64]

Chinese Writing Turns into Graffiti Works

Probably the most unusual and unexpected use of Chinese writing and calligraphy in contemporary artistic expression is in graffiti art. However, in China writing and calligraphy are everywhere, especially along the streets, for example, in the calligraphic 'signboards' located on every government, institutional, and religious building; in the commercial, road, and advertising signs; and even on walls in the scrawled advertisements by the migrant workers.[65]

'Graffiti art' (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术) appeared in the Chinese cities in the mid-1990s, becoming popular in the mid-2000s, declining since the mid-2010s, and experiencing a new flowering in the post-COVID era.[66] Even if most of the Chinese crews/writers were deeply influenced by the Euro-American tradition of graffiti, using the Latin alphabet, English language, and Euro-American styles, there are some others[67] that encourage a process of "Sinicization" of graffiti art (Valjakka 2016), in order to create a 'Chinese graffiti style' (*Zhongguo tese de tuyayishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术) (Iezzi 2019b). This means the use of Chinese characters instead of

Latin letters to shape writing pieces, creating 'charactering' pieces instead of 'lettering' pieces, and the reference to other Chinese cultural elements, such as the insertion of calligraphic inscriptions and the use of calligraphic lines to write graffiti tags.

As to **graffiti tags**, for example, there are numerous Chinese tags of the Kwanyin Clan (**Guanyin** '觀音/观音'), one of the most important Beijing crews,[68] usually written with a style very similar to running or cursive scripts and using the spray can as it were a brush, blending the spray or moving the can closer and further away from the wall in order to create different thicknesses of the lines.[69] A particular interesting example is in Figure 7.12; in this tag, the artists reproduced the regular thickness of the lines typical of the calligraphic 'great seal style' (*dazhuan shu* 大篆书) and wrote the two characters using their pictographic forms, using an approach similar to 'pictographic calligraphy' (see Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images Section). They in fact transformed the right part of the first character *Guan* 觀 into a face with two big eyes – the meaning of the character is, in fact, 'look at, watch, observe', and the lower part of the second character *yin* 音 into an open mouth – the meaning of the character is, in fact, 'phone, sound'.

As to **calligraphic inscription**(s), representative examples are in the huge graffiti piece '**Joy in bottle**' (Figure 7.13) made by the ABS crew (an

Figure 7.12 Kwanyin Clan, *Tag Guanyin* '觀音', spray paint on wall, Sihui: Beijing, Photographed by Llys on 3 March 2007. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

Figure 7.13 ABS crew et al. (Max, Jer, Way Fan, Bllod Bro, Spade, Kayo, Thorn Donis, Neon, Deb.Roc.Ski etc.), *Joy in bottle*, 19–21 May 2018, spray paint on wall, Berlin, *Berlin Mural Fest*. Courtesy of the artists.

important Beijing crew)[70] with other Chinese and foreign writers during the Berlin Mural Fest in 2018. In this work there are: (1) an inscription that listed writers' cities of origin,[71] as a modern colophon of travelling artists, and (2) another inscription with the big writing '*Po fanlong* 破樊笼' ('The birdcage has disintegrated') and the description of the main features of Chinese dragons that 'summon wind and rain and are omnipotent' ('*hufenghuanyu, wusuobuneng* 呼风唤雨, 无所不能')[72] that references the gigantic and fierce red Chinese dragon painted on the whole wall.[73]

As shown in this example, the calligraphic inscriptions in the graffiti pieces can be used as colophon, as in the calligraphic tradition, or to explain the meaning of the work, as in the Chinese painting tradition. There are also inscriptions made by the Kwanyin Clan where the reference to calligraphy is even deeper because the content of these inscriptions are Chinese poems, the traditional content of Chinese calligraphy.[74]

As to **'characteringʼ piece**, one representative example is **Qingwu tuya** 请勿涂鸦 (Please no graffiti, 2020, Figure 7.14) by Corw and Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528),[75] the father of Beijing graffiti.

The piece has a distinctly political orientation, as it was created on Jingmi Road, Beijing's most important hall of fame for some time now, and once home – as Li Qiuqiu himself says[76] – to numerous graffiti. Later, these were all buffed by the government and replaced by a long, grey, and anonymous wall dotted with the black stencil inscriptions *Qingwu tuya* 请勿涂鸦 ("No graffiti") posted by the government itself. As an act of

Figure 7.14 Li Qiuqiu e Corw, *Qingwu tuya* 请勿涂鸦 (*Please no graffiti*), 2020, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Jingmi Road. Courtesy of the artists.

protest, Li Qiuqiu and Corw decided to paint graffiti with the same text but using bright colours and fun animations so as to brighten the blank wall that had once been the heart of a shared creativity. As a result of this act of artistic rebellion, many other writers followed suit, once more filling the wall with graffiti: a fine example of a peaceful protest with spray cans. The political use of Chinese writing is so reactivated not as form of control and power as in the past but as form of protest precisely against that control and power exercised from above.

Conclusion

The artworks analyzed in this chapter show how Chinese calligraphy is still extremely productive in contemporary times and has succeeded in giving life to new artistic expressions born from the encounter of calligraphy with other artistic forms. It is the case of the 'pictorial/pictographic calligraphy' born from the encounter with painting, the 'performances of blackened calligraphy' born from the encounter with performance and conceptual art, the contemporary dance and musical pieces inspired by calligraphy as well as the 'musicalligraphy-dance performances' born from the encounter with dance and music, the logos made of Chinese characters and the fashion collections inspired by calligraphic strokes born respectively from

the encounter with logo and fashion design, and the 'charactering pieces', calligraphic graffiti tags and inscriptions born from the encounter with graffiti art. These artistic expressions cannot all be defined as 'calligraphy' because they do not respect all the calligraphic principles, but they can be defined as '**art from calligraphy**'[77] because they take inspiration, lifeblood, techniques, styles, contents, materials, tools, and/or aesthetic and philosophical conceptions from calligraphy.

Through these expressions, calligraphy has merely expressed qualities already inherent in it: with painting, calligraphy shares techniques, tools, materials, training, philosophical, and aesthetic conception, and the fact that 'the earliest forms of the written characters can be regarded as pictures' (Chiang 1973, 226), so calligraphy and painting can be seen as 'branches of the same art' (*ibid.*). The rhythm, dynamism and harmony of calligraphic strokes and gestures reveal the 'performative quality' of calligraphy. Being based on a highly graphic writing made of sets of meaningful lines easily recognizable by Chinese people/consumers, calligraphy is ideal for decorative and applied artistic productions. Like graffiti art, it has always been a 'public art' visible in the public spaces and walls. For all these reasons, in contemporary times Chinese writing could be transformed into pictorial images, performative actions, design products, and graffiti works. In doing so, calligraphy opens itself to a broader understanding, being easily readable also to a non-Chinese audience and creating artistic expressions that exist comfortably within the global art world while remaining indelibly Chinese.

Regarding the development of contemporary Chinese art as a transformation of China's cultural heritage from within and from without in order to create a globally comprehensible language (Gao 2011; Hou 2002; Wu 2013), calligraphy is certainly part of this development.

Notes

1 The other three abilities were the ability to play *qin* 琴 (a stringed musical instrument), *qi* 棋 (the board game called 'Go') and to produce *hua* 画 (paintings) (Li 2009, 1).
2 Chinese writing; it is the oldest writing system still in use today.
3 In a calligraphic work, in fact, we can admire and enjoy the reverberation of this vital energy and universal impulse since the calligrapher, thanks to the cultivation of his own psychophysical unity (*xin* 心), is able to guarantee the openings that allow the flow of *qi* through his arm, his wrist, the brush, and reverberations in the calligraphic lines, showing in his works the evident signs of such a completely obstacle-free flow (Pasqualotto 2007, 105–27).
4 The four writing instruments are paper, writing brush, ink stick, and ink stone, the so-called 'Four treasures of the study' (*wenfangsibao* 文房四宝); the colors are black (the ink), white (the paper), and red (the seal that is the artist's signature); the three major components of a calligraphic piece are the main text in

the center of the piece, inscription(s) on the sides, and seal(s) (Li 2009, 157–8); the disposal arrangement of the text is in columns, and the text must be read from top to bottom and from right to left; the five main calligraphic scripts/styles are: seal script (*zhuanshu* 篆书), clerical script (*lishu* 隶书), regular script (*kaishu* 楷书), running script (*xingshu* 行书) and cursive script (*caoshu* 草书); the contents of calligraphies are usually poems and literary texts; the calligraphic training is based on tracing and copying from models of calligraphy masters.

5 In this powerful and extremely coherent tradition there are, however, some examples of the emergence of innovative elements, always being indicators of ongoing cultural changes, such as the emergence of 'wild cursive script' (*kuangcao* 狂草) in the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Schlombs 1998), the diffusion of Chan Buddhist calligraphy in the Song dynasty (960–1127) (Harrist and Fong 1999), and the advent of 'Leninist/revolutionary calligraphy' during the Maoist period (1949–1976) (Kraus 1991).

6 The artist took inspiration from various versions of the character written in 'bronze script' (*jinwen* 金文), a variety of Chinese scripts written on ritual bronzes from the Shang dynasty (c. 1600 BC–1045 BC) to the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046 BC–256 BC) and even later. To see the different 'bronze script' versions of the character: https://www.zdic.net/zd/zx/jw/%E9%A9%AC (last access 20.12.2023).

7 In a similar work entitled 'Deer crying' *Luming* 鹿鸣 (1990), Gu Gan followed the same process reiterating the pictographic versions of the two characters of the title *lu* 鹿 ('deer') and *ming* 鸣 ('cry') in order to recreate the din of a herd of wailing deer, also adding colors to accentuate the pictorial charge of the representation.

8 If we compare, for example, the work 'Bird 1–05' (2005) and the shape of the character *niao* '鸟' in bronze script (*jinwen* 金文), we see how the analogy between the two is very strong, as it is between the artwork 'Fish 7–07' (2007) and the form of the character *yu* '鱼' in small seal script (*xiaozhuan* 小篆, another archaic Chinese script), and between the work 'Fish 45–07' and the shape of the character *yu* in bronze script. If, however, we focus on other works in the series, such as 'Bird 3–05' (2005) and 'Fish 45–07' (2007), we instead see how this analogy with the archaic forms of characters is lost in favor of a greater resemblance to the conventional ways of drawing birds and fishes. Finally, in works such as 'Bird 07–42,44' (2007) and 'Fish 07–40,42,43' (2007) we see compositions of lines that only vaguely recall the shapes of birds and fishes (Iezzi 2019a, 249, 256, 258–67).

9 Although starting from the same module (the characters '鸟' and '鱼'), irregularity is formalized as a creative principle (each work is different from the others). In this sense, the form does not end in the original idea (the Chinese character), but continually evolves, because there is no specularity between project and execution. The work shows the possibility of an accepted, assimilated, even intentional asymmetry, participating in the mentality of modern art and modern world, made up of unexpected events and surprises (ibid., 256). This idea is borrowed from Action painting.

10 The reference is in particular to the artworks of this series he did in 1998 (ibid., 199–201).

11 The choice to create an installation, that is an art form halfway between sculpture and architecture, is also a point of contact with the art of calligraphy. There is in fact a strict correlation between calligraphy and both sculpture

and architecture that are 'plastic arts', as demonstrated by Chiang Yee (1973, 229–39). There are several contemporary artists that use calligraphy and Chinese writing in their installations.

12 Xu Bing's official website: https://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/231?year=1999&type=year, last access: 21.12.2023. For more information about this series, see Vainker and Xu 2013.

13 For a detailed description of artworks of this kind, such as *Chun hu song niu* tu 春虎送牛图 ('The Year of the Tiger Follows the Year of the Ox', 2010) and *Qiu Yun* 秋韵 ('Autumn Rhythm', 2010), see Iezzi (2013b, 63–4).

14 There are several definitions proposed by art critics of this type of calligraphy: Zhang Yiguo (1998, 19) defines it as 'paintinglike calligraphy', Zhu Qingsheng (2000, 162) as 'current of calligraphy and painting/current of pictorial characters' (*Zi hua pai* 字画派), Chew Kim Liong as (2001) 'pictographic calligraphy' or 'painting-like calligraphy and calligraphy-dominated painting', Gao Tianming (2004, 190) as 'calligraphic painting/pictographic calligraphy' (*shufa huihua* 书法绘画), Chen Dazhong (2005: 96) as 'Pictographic transformation of Chinese characters' (*Hanzi huihua hua* 汉字绘画化), Liu Zongcao (2006) as 'Illustrated character-meaning creations' (*Tujie ziji shi de chuangzuo* 图解字义式的创作), Zhang Aiguo (2007, 158) as 'Painting of characters/Characters model in pictorial form' (*Hua zi xing* 画字型), Liu Canming (2010, 86–94) as 'Pictorialization of Chinese characters' (*Hanzi tuhua hua moxing* 汉字图画化模式), etc. The first to distinguish this tendency was Li Xianting (1991, 254–55), when he wrote that there are some artists that 'draw Chinese characters like pictures' (*zihua xiangxing* 画字象形, *ibid*., 254).

15 For an explanation of the meaning of the label 'Chinese Modern Calligraphy', see Iezzi (2015, 206–8).

16 For more information about the Modernist calligraphic movement, see Barrass (2002, 162–93); Iezzi (2013a, 164–7).

17 The images of all the artworks displayed in the exhibition are visible in the exhibition catalogue (Wang 1986).

18 Li Luogong began this type of experimentation as early as the 1970s, together with Huang Miaozi and Zhang Zhengyu (1904–1976). His most famous artwork in that sense was entitled 'I Lost My Proud Poplar' (1973). In this artwork the Chinese pictograms that are the transcription of a poem written by Mao Zedong are arranged as in a Fauves painting. This artwork became the symbol of the exhibition organized in 1973 by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and the other members of the so-called 'Gang of Four' that gathered exemplary works of what they considered unacceptable in contemporary art.

19 For a detailed description of this artwork, see Zhang (1998, 15). Xu Bing's 'Landscript' series was probably inspired by this work.

20 Among them, the most important are Dai Shanqing 戴山青 (1944–2004), Wang Xuezhong 王学仲 (1925–2013), Xie Yun 谢云 (1929–2021), Deng Yuanchang 邓元昌 (b. 1939), Wang Naizhuang 王乃壮 (b. 1929), Peng Shiqiang 彭世强 (b. 1944), who took part in the First Exhibition of Modern Calligraphy, Huang Yao 黄尧 (1917–1987), Wang Yong 王镛 (b. 1948), Wang Tianmin 王天民 (b. 1944), Wen Bei 文备 (b. 1953), Wang Dongling 王冬龄 (b. 1945), Bai Di 白砥 (b. 1965), Tong Yang-tze 董阳孜 (b. 1942), Zhu Naizheng 朱乃正 (1935–2013), Xing Shizhen 邢士珍 (1936–2019), Ma Xiao 马啸 (b. 1962), Zhang Aiguo 张爱国 (b. 1967), Liu Canming 刘灿铭 (b. 1963), Yan Binghui 阎秉会 (b. 1956), Lin Xinchen 林信成 (b. 1952), Wang Gongyi 王公懿 (b. 1946), etc.

21 There are some artists, such as Pu Lieping, Wei Ligang 魏立刚 (b. 1964), Shao Yan 邵岩 (b. 1960), Luo Qi, Fung Ming-chip 冯明秋 (b. 1951), Qiu Zhenzhong 邱振中 (b. 1947), and Chen Guangwu 陈光武 (b. 1967), who greatly deform Chinese characters until they are (nearly) unrecognizable so that their works seem abstract, even if their starting point is Chinese writing (Iezzi 2013b, 54–75); and some others, such as Qin Feng 秦风 (b. 1961) and Zhang Dawo 张大我 (1943–2023), who use real 'abstract' calligraphic lines with no connection with Chinese characters as their stylistic signature (ibid., 76–84).

22 The corn broom was used by Pu Lieping in 2021 to write a poem by Liu Ji in the work titled *Wu yue shijiu ri* dayu 五月十九日大雨 ('Heavy Rain on the 19th day of the 5th lunar month'), while the augmented reality headset with related touch controllers was used by Wang Dongling in the same year to create a 3D virtual calligraphy. Other new tools are the syringe with a small ink tank using by Shao Yan, cigarettes or incense sticks using by Wang Tiande 王天德 (b. 1960), the flashlight using by Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b. 1969), etc.

23 The first calligraphic collages were made at the end of the 1980s, for example, by Wang Dongling using newspaper sheets, but it was only in 1998, with the foundation of the so-called 'School of the Academics' (*Xueyuanapai* 学院派) by Chen Zhenlian 陈振濂 (b. 1956) that a group of calligraphers focused on the creation of calligraphic collages and combined paintings; since then, every kind of support/material has been experimented (plastic, photos, human body, dresses, gunpowder, neon, etc.); as to digital support, after the first experimentations at the end of the 1980s to shape calligraphic strokes on a computer screen, the artist who best connected calligraphy to information technology, GPS technology, and even video games was Feng Mengbo 冯梦波 (b. 1966).

24 To watch the cartoon: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=7Mhz61n8To0 (last access: 09.01.2024).

25 The exhibition 'The Music of Ink – Calligraphies by Luo Qi and Silvio Ferragina in dialogue with the Chinese archive collection of the Braidense Library' was held at the Braidense National Library in Milan from 21 March to 28 April 2018.

26 For a detailed description of the video, see Iezzi (2018, 15).

27 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQ1mpKlIxhQ (last access: 12.07.2024)

28 As the artist said: 'This traditional Chinese story is known by all common people, and it speaks about a family story. It is about determination and challenge: if you really want to do something, then it could really happen. Other phrases are about human fate, like a kind of divination. Your eyes, nose, mouth, ears, cheekbone, and moles indicate your future, wealth, sex, disease, etc.' (Zhang Huan's official website: http://www.zhanghuan.com/worken/info_71.aspx?itemid=962&parent&lcid=193, last access 09.01.2024).

29 In 2001, Zhang Huan played a similar performance in Shanghai entitled 'Shanghai Family Tree'. In this performance, he posed with two other people – a man and woman – and their faces were also covered by Chinese characters. The meaning of this performance overwhelms the individuality, defining the person's association with society. In 2015, the artist played a new version of this performance entitled 'Family Tree 2015' during the live-art exhibition '15 Rooms' held in the Long Museum of Shanghai. The performance reproduced the writing process of the original 2000 'Family Tree', but, before the writing performance, Zhang Huan had interviewed 12 men and women born after 1990 to study the life and dreams of this new generation. Zhang Huan used the

answers given by the interviewees to write them on their faces until their faces slowly darkened.

30 After this experiment, Qiu Zhijie did a similar performance entitled 'Heart Sutra' (*Xin jing* 心经) in 1999, copying this ancient Buddhist text a hundred times until the page was completely obscured. The artist wonders about the veracity and reliability of a translated text like the Chinese Heart Sutra that represents a fundamental text for the spread of Chan Buddhism in China.

31 The 'Thousand Character Classic' is a Chinese poem that has been used as a primer for teaching Chinese characters to children from the sixth century onward; it contains exactly 1,000 characters, and it could be sung in a way similar to children learning the Latin alphabet singing an 'alphabet song'. It is also a phenomenon in the calligraphy realm that has been continuously composed by numerous famous calligraphy masters through the history.

32 Another similar performance titled 'Writing the Orchid Pavilion for the Second Time' (*Shuxie Lantingxu dierbian* 书写兰亭序第二遍) took place on November 27, 2022 during the Wuzhen Theater Festival. Wu Xixia wrote inside an airtight sphere placed in the water. In this performance, the four characters *Zhi hu zhe ye* 之乎者也 were written using *nü shu* 女书 (a 'secret' female writing), the character *ye* 也 is replaced with the female vagina symbol, and a long snake-shaped strip surrounded the sphere simulates the shape of an umbilical cord.

33 The reference is to the Derrida's notion of deconstruction. The four performances are also examples of two of the three categories into which artists who try to interconnect innovatively calligraphy and performance art can be divided: Zhang Huan and Qiu Zhijie are contemporary artists/performers who use calligraphy as a source of inspiration and a medium for their performative/conceptual works (other examples are by Gu Wenda, Song Dong, and Wu Wei), while Ni Li and Wu Xixia are female artists/performers who use calligraphy to 'give voice' to the feminine (other examples are by Echo Morgan and Li Xinmo). The third category is composed of contemporary calligraphers who try to transform calligraphic modes into a performative action to revitalize and modernize calligraphy (e.g., Zhang Qiang, Zhu Qingsheng, Shao Yan, Pu Lieping and Wang Dongling).

34 All these art critics proposed a different definition, Zhang Nan *fanshufa* 反书法 (1999), Qian Qinggui *feishufa* 非书法 (2000), Jiang Xu & Wang Dongling *feihanzi shufa* 非汉子书法 (2005), and Qu Lifeng *wuzishufa* 无字书法 (2008). The first to theorize this concept was Wang Nanming (Wang 1994).

35 Many other artworks by the avant-garde movement also belong to this category, in particular those by Bai Qianshen 白谦慎 (b. 1955), Gu Wenda 谷文达 (b. 1955), and Xu Bing made of unreadable characters. For more information, see Iezzi (2013a, 167–9).

36 After the first example of 'calligraphy-dance performance' held in 1983 at the Asia Society Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium, starting from the idea of 'dancing ink' by the Chinese calligrapher Wang Fangyu 王方宇 (1913–1997) (Wang 1984), other examples are the dancing pieces 'Upon Calligraphy/Beyond Calligraphy' (*Linchi wu mo* 临池舞墨, 2005–ongoing) by the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, 'Cursive (Wild Grass)' (2006) by the Yin Mei Dance, 'Connect Transfer' *Lianjie zhuanhuan* 连接转换 (2004) by the Shen Wei Dance Arts, and 'Random Thoughts on Oracle-bone Inscriptions' (*Jiagu suixiang* 甲骨随想) (2001) by the dancer Huang Doudou 黄豆豆 (b. 1977).

37 For a detailed analysis of 'Cursive I' and 'Cursive II' see Ho I L. (2009).
38 The analysis is based on the vision of the three DVDs recording the three ballets: *Xingcao* 行草 *(Cursive). Part one of Cursive: A Trilogy* (2013), *Song yan · Xingcao er* 松煙 · 行草貳 (*Pine Smoke · Cursive II*) (2013), *Kuangcao* 狂草 (Wild Cursive) (2013).
39 In the second chapter of the ballet, for example, the dancer moves her body in front of a projection of the Chinese character *yong* 永 (eternal), a character that contains all the basic variations of brush strokes and gestural vocabularies commonly used in regular script, cursive script, and 'wild cursive script' (*kuangcao*) in Chinese calligraphy. The character is written stroke by stroke, and the order of the movement of the brush serves as a sequential score of the dancer's movement so that the dancer repeatedly writes/dances the *yong* character with her whole body.
40 This is a *chengyu* 成语 (a four-character idiom) that is a common expression to indicate a particularly vigorous, graceful and powerful calligraphic style. This expression also underlines the strict connection between calligraphy and dance at linguistic level.
41 Chinese calligraphy is 'a musical art' (Billeter 1990, 89). Similarities between calligraphy and music go also beyond the concept of harmony (*ibid.*, 89-107): tone color is like writing nature, acoustic quality is like quality of line, intonation is like accurate writing skill, volume is like writing intensity, tone range is like the comparison of writing changes, tempo is like pause and transition when writing, and rhythm in music is like the partial or entire arrangement of calligraphic works, also called 'rhythm' in Chinese.
42 To listen to the song, visit Chou Wen-chung official website: https://chouwen-chung.org/de/composition/cursive/(12.11.2022).
43 *Ibid.* In his late compositions (from 1990 to 2003), it is possible to recognize a correlation between his calligraphies and the musical gestures (Everett 2007).
44 To see the images of the calligraphies, visit the official website of the M+: https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/exhibitions/m-commission-tong-yang-tze/ (last access 10.01.2024).
45 The use of excerpts of Chinese classical texts as content of the calligraphies is a *leit motiv* in the Tong yang-tze's artistic production.
46 Official website of the US-China Music Institute of the Bard College Conservatory of Music, *Ink Art and New Music Project*: https://www.barduschinamusic.org/news/2022/ink-art-and-new-music-project (last access 10.01.2024).
47 This experiment is part of the 'Ink Art and New Music' project that is a creative exchange project among the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and M+, in collaboration with the Bard College Conservatory of Music (New York), that aims to explore the aesthetic commonality and discover the innovative potential of ink art and new music. During the second phase of the project, composers worked on new compositions inspired by individually chosen works from the M+ collection of twentieth- and twenty-first-century ink art.
48 To see the edited video of the performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tXrIdYPCqM (last access 11.01.2024).
49 The 'Dunhuang music score' is a tablature-notation for *pipa* (Chinese lute) discovered in the Mogao Buddhist caves in Dunhuang (Gansu province) by the French sinologist Paul Pelliot in 1908. It probably dates back to the tenth century, and it is composed of 20 tablature symbols which are simple characters, radicals or phonetic symbols.

50 Luo Qi used the 'Dunhuang music score' to translate Italian famous opera and arias in a series entitled 'Writing Music – Silent Melodies' (*Xieyue – Wusheng zhi ge* 写乐·无声之歌, 2018–2023).
51 The translation of the 18 characters is by Qian Na and Ying Yuan Qian and Ying (2020, 77).
52 For a detailed description of the 'Musicalligraphy project', see Ferragina (2022, 70–89).
53 These logos can be divided into 4 categories: (1) logos related to international event held in China (i.e., for the Paralympic Games 2008, the Olympic Games 2008, and the Shanghai Expo 2010 inspired by the character *shi* 世 ['world']); (2) institutional logos (i.e., the logo of the China Railway made of the two characters *ren* 人 ['people'] and *gong* 工 ['work'], and the logo of the Hangzhou city in which the character *Hang* 杭 was transformed into traditional architectural elements); (3) commercial logos (i.e. the logo of the cosmetic brand 'Drawshine' [*Zhuangxie* 妆写] made of the pictographic form of the character *zhuang* 妆 ['woman's adornments'], and the logo of the 'Crafts on Peel' artisans' organization made of the character *shou* 手 ['hand'] that, being mirrored, designed the character *wo* 我 ['io']); (4) logos of artistic projects (i.e., the CAFA ART INFO that uses a font invented by Xu Bing and the WRITE project with the character *xie* 写 ['to write'] written by Luo Qi).
54 A brief description of the logo is available at the link: https://web.archive.org/web/20080720184339/http://en.paralympic.beijing2008.cn/graphic/n214342413.shtml (last access 11.01.2024).
55 To see the logo, visit the official website of the Olympics Games: https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/beijing-2008/logo-design (last access 11.01.2024).
56 There are many Chinese logos that reproduce the typical Chinese seal with the character(s) of the brand/institution/event precisely because the seal represents the artist's sign, so it is the way in which the artist is identified; the logo in fact is nothing more than the way in which a brand/institution/event should be easily identified.
57 In fashion design, calligraphy plays an important role as: (1) as a source of inspiration for both Chinese and foreign stylists (i.e. Christian Dior 1951, Coco Chanel 1956, Vivienne Tam 2013, Chloe Sung 2016, and Grace Chen 2021–2022), (2) because of several collaborations between 'modern calligraphers' and famous fashion houses/stylists (i.e. King of Koowloon and William Tang Tat Chi in 1997, Luo Qi and EFEN in 2008–2009, Xu Bing and Calvin Klein 2011), and (3) in the use of dresses as a new support for innovative calligraphies (i.e., in some works by Zhang Qiang, Wang Tiande, Shi Yu and Wang Xinyuan).
58 Tong Yang-tze official website: https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6 (last access 15.01.2024).
59 In 2016, Tong Yang-tze held the exhibition entitled 'Silent Music' inspired by the relationship between calligraphy and music in Belgium, associated with a music competition (the 2016 Queen Elisabeth Music Competition) and in Tapei, where she curated a crossover performance that involved jazz musicians and contemporary dancers. Using the artworks of this exhibition as source of inspiration for fashion designers, the cross-media experiment of 'From Ink to Apparel' involved three art forms: calligraphy, fashion design, and music, respectively a form of visual art, applied art, and performing art.

60 This last statement is reiterated by the artist in the video: https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6 (last access 15.01.2024).
61 See note 67 (2).
62 The number of visitors of the first two exhibitions exceeded 100,000: https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6 (last access 15.01.2024).
63 For example, in critical theory the thesis on 'the culture industry' by Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 (1944).
64 Guo Yaojie did a similar affirmation about calligraphy applied to graphic design Guo (2015, 287).
65 For more details and the significance of these scrawled advertisements, see: Parke (2018, 261–84). She defined this phenomenon as a 'public calligraphy performance'.
66 For a detail analysis of the diffusion of graffiti art in China and in particular in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu, see: Bisceglia, Merenda, and Iezzi (2024).
67 The most important crews/writes are that seeking for a 'Chinese graffiti style', which means in particular the use of Chinese language in their works, are: the Kwanyin Clan, the Beijing Penzi, the Yellow Peril, MES, EXAS, Camel, ZEIT, and MAGE in Beijing; Iron in Xi'an; the OOPS crew in Shanghai; Touchy in Shenzhen; Xeme and Sinic in Hong Kong; Chen13 and Dohak652 in Guangzhou; the Kong2 crew in Changsha; Moon in Quanzhou; Mora in Canton; Gas and Reset in Chengdu; and Creepymouse and Blackzao in Taiwan.
68 For more information about the Kwanyin Clan, see Iezzi (2019b).
69 To see some examples of this kind of works: *ibid.,* 427 (432), 433.
70 For more information about the ABS crew, see Bisceglia et al. (2024, 93–111).
71 The content of the inscription is: 'Some people come from afar: Beijing, Tongchuan, Chengdu, Yinzhou, Wuhan, Chongqing. Greeting from China' *(You ming zi yuan lai: Beijing, Tongchuan, Chengdu, Yinzhou, Wuhan, Chongqing Laizi Zhongguo de wenhou* 有明自远方来 北京, 铜川, 成都, 银州, 武汉, 重庆来自中国的问候).
72 These are the last two lines of the calligraphic inscription.
73 There are actually two other brief inscriptions along the very long piece: one is the title of the work "Joy in bottle", and the other is the indication of the year of the execution of the artwork in Chinese (erlingyiba 二零一八,which means 2018) with the name of the festival in Latin letters "Berlin Mural Fest". All four inscriptions are dotted by red seals with the writers' tags so that they look like real traditional calligraphic inscriptions.
74 For a detailed analysis of these inscriptions, see Iezzi (2019b).
75 For more information about Li Qiuqiu, see Bisceglia et al. (2024, 56–69).
76 Artist's interview with the author, 13.02.2021.
77 The expression 'art from calligraphy' (*yuanzi shufa de yishu* 源自书法的艺术) was firstly used by the Chinese calligrapher and scholar Qiu Zhenzhong (Qiu 2004, 277) as an alternative to the definition 'Chinese modern calligraphy' (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa* 中国现代书法) to classify some of the new expressions of Chinese contemporary calligraphy. Qiu Zhenzhong divided the artworks into three categories that can be summarized as no-characters, abstract, and conceptual works (ibid., 278–79); created a sub-category called 'art from writing' (*yuanzi shuxie de yishu* 源自书写的艺术); and distinguished 'the art from calligraphy' from 'the art from Chinese characters' (*yuanzi Hanzi de yishu* 源自文字的艺术) (ibid., 283). The use of this expression in this chapter does not follow Qiu Zhenzhong's classification.

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