

## The Infinite Possibility of "Chinese Characters" in calligraphy——On the Boundary of "Modern Calligraphy"

YuJie Zhu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arts College, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China

<sup>a</sup> 363810107@qq.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** During the development of "modern calligraphy", the advocacy of "breaking the tradition" and "anti-tradition" has been a consistent theme. Artists are eager to break down the "tradition" and "modern" of calligraphy with dualistic thinking to embark on an "anti-art" journey. To ask the last question of calligraphy tradition: what is the value of the existence of "Chinese characters"? Can the art which abandons the tradition of "Chinese characters" be called calligraphy? It is obvious that this is not only a dispute between the old and the new, but also a contest between Chinese and Western cultural ideologies.

**Key words:** Modern calligraphy; Non Chinese characters; Abstract

The development of modern Chinese calligraphy is generally considered to originate from the "first exhibition of modern calligraphy" held in the Chinese Art Museum in October 1985. These exhibitors were widely influenced by the creation of a number of characters by the Japanese "school of ink impression," where they were transforming from the outside to the inside in terms of schema or concept, which is shown in exaggerated lines, ink color expression, and spatial configuration, all in the effort of emphasizing "form." This can also be understood as "breaking down Chinese characters by painting" (Figure 1), as an expression of "modern people's feelings" and enter the "modernization" of calligraphy.

After the first exhibition of modern calligraphy, calligraphy has experienced stages of neoclassicism, popular calligraphy style, and academic school, in addition to a large number of modern calligraphy practitioners appearing and engaging in the form. They have made great efforts in the forms of dots and lines, spatial structure and arrangement of rules, and they have put calligraphy under the "formalism", or directly attributed calligraphy to "modeling art", "visual art", etc. Bold ink and modeling speed up the process of "modernization" of calligraphy, while the "readability" of calligraphy works weakens. In the past, people who were not in the field of calligraphy could not read cursive characters and seal characters because of the limitation of "symbol" in the calligraphy style. However, in the current era, even people in the calligraphy circle who go to appreciate the calligraphy works in exhibitions are unable to recognize the text content. Therefore, some scholars directly put forward and contend that the existence of Chinese characters has restrained the development of calligraphy. If we can't break away from the Chinese characters, we can't get out of the traditional fence of calligraphy, and thus can't enter the scope of modern calligraphy. Due to this, there's a banner of calligraphy under

the vision of "breaking away from the tradition" and "anti tradition", thinking that we should abandon the Chinese characters, and even eliminate calligraphy for a period of time, as they believe that



Fig.1 Rise up upon hearing the crow of a rooster and practice with the sword, 105×66cm, by Gu Gan in 1990

"modern calligraphy doesn't resemble calligraphy. Another point of view is that Chinese characters are unique abstract symbols of calligraphy. Their existence endows calligraphy with abstract value and provides infinite possibilities for the modern development of calligraphy art. Put in this light, it's clear that calligraphy is different from other art categories. "Chinese characters" have become a boundary issue in the field of modern development of calligraphy.

## **1. The Concept of "Modern" in Calligraphy**

Traditional calligraphy has never been separated from the carrier of Chinese characters, just as western realism has never been separated from specific objects, and has become a fixed cognition of people. Therefore, when works appeared that were seemingly like calligraphy, but distinctively not, and displayed in the first exhibition of modern calligraphy, people were full of doubt regarding the word "modern" in calligraphy art. In a broad sense, "modern" is a word in the sense of time, which is equivalent to any new period in history; the "official change" in the Qin and Han Dynasties, the "new style" in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, and the "stelology" rising in the query of "not taking part in classics, rough and vulgar" are all the products of "modern" at that time. Each new form of "modern" has been questioned and debated at the beginning of their emergence. The fundamental difference between the evolution of modern calligraphy and ancient calligraphy lies in the conflict between the "internal" and "external" of calligraphy. The evolution of ancient calligraphy, whether in the form of calligraphy or in the collision of different styles of calligraphy, is based on the internal cry and attempt of calligraphy. It is obvious that modern calligraphy has been challenged. Under the influence of western modern art, the impact of foreign culture, "destructive", "anti-traditional" and "anti art" became the concept pursued by modern calligraphers. They devoted themselves to the disintegration and reconstruction of traditional concepts, the soil of traditional calligraphy was disintegrated, and the "carrier" and "language" - Chinese characters of calligraphy ushered in the first major crisis in the history of calligraphy. From the formalism rising at the end of the 19th century to the structuralism and notation in the 1960s, western modern art studies are all devoted to the understanding of the noumenon of art works. They believe that what hinders the understanding of noumenon is the "illusion" of external norms. If we understand the meaning of a work through the "historical and cultural" approach, we will inevitably bury the value of art itself, thus, when constructivism and formalism become more distant, one of the outstanding points is to "replace art image with structure". According to the practitioners of modern calligraphy, the fixed text meaning of Chinese character symbols has been implemented for thousands of years, which hinders our access to the noumenon of calligraphy and should be abandoned.

Therefore, since the first exhibition of calligraphy in 1985, there have been many works like calligraphy and painting, but the new question is, if Chinese characters are abandoned, is there any boundary between calligraphy and painting? In the development of modern calligraphy, "modern" disputes caused by "Chinese characters" are everywhere.

## **2. The Dilemma of "Chinese Characters" and "Modern Calligraphy"**

In the traditional calligraphy art, Chinese characters are the basic aesthetic carrier, along with the dots and lines, structure and composition. If we break this carrier and accept the idea of western modern art -- subversion, deviation, deconstruction and meaninglessness, what can calligraphy keep if not its dots, lines, ink color and space, which are the structure of "calligraphy noumenon". However, without the restriction of "Chinese characters" and by only developing "structure", what else does calligraphy retain? Is there any boundary between it and abstract painting? According to art historian Lang Shaojun, calligraphy "can't be a 'modernist school'", because it can't be as radical as western avant-garde artists. Calligraphy is suitable for accepting the spirit of "postmodernism" and "for referring to the principle of unifying modern concepts and free absorption from tradition". For thousands of years, the basis of calligraphy is Chinese characters. Although Chinese characters are abstract symbols, they have strict objective norms and meanings, just like the realistic images in realistic paintings, with absolute standards. The reason why modern western painting is modern is the "subversibility" of "realistic image". When the Japanese "school of ink impression" came out in the 1980s, this kind of writing, which is neither Chinese characters nor kana, caused a great stir. The "modern calligraphy" which subverted

"Chinese characters" came on the stage. Is what calligraphy art ushers in at this moment the re-development or end of calligraphy art?

There seems to have been no clear result in the argument of modern calligraphy in Chinese art circles throughout the 1990s. Li Xianting himself doubts the concept of "modern calligraphy". If we think about it in this way, it seems that it is difficult for calligraphy to enter into the process of modernization like western art. In many art categories, the only obstacle for calligraphy to enter into modern art directly is probably "Chinese characters". At present, there are many artists who break away from Chinese characters, but they are often divided into modern art practitioners, that is, they learn from the language of calligraphy to develop contemporary art. However, it doesn't work that way. In the many years to come, will this so-called threshold be like the debate on whether or not calligraphy is an art?

### 3. The "Writing" Practice of "Non Chinese characters"

Wang Nanming criticizes the art attempt of modern calligraphers dialectically in his book: *The Obstacle of Calligraphy*. He thinks that they have misunderstood the idea of "calligraphy and painting share the same origin" and simply changed calligraphy into "pictograph". This "painting" has not broken through the traditional calligraphy paradigm, nor risen to the level of abstract art. It is "wanting to change but not knowing how to change" (quoted from Bai Qianshen), and then it became a kind of superficial attempt against the "Chinese character". Therefore, Wang Nanming thinks that "modern calligraphy is not calligraphy". If "modern calligraphy" is required to be calligraphy, why

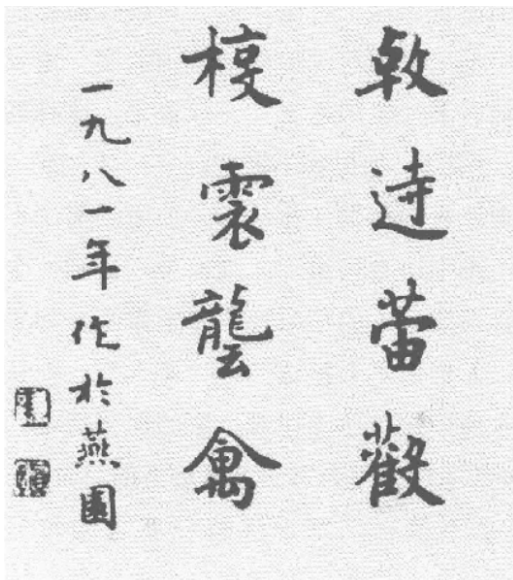


Fig2 Bian Qianshen Making Characters

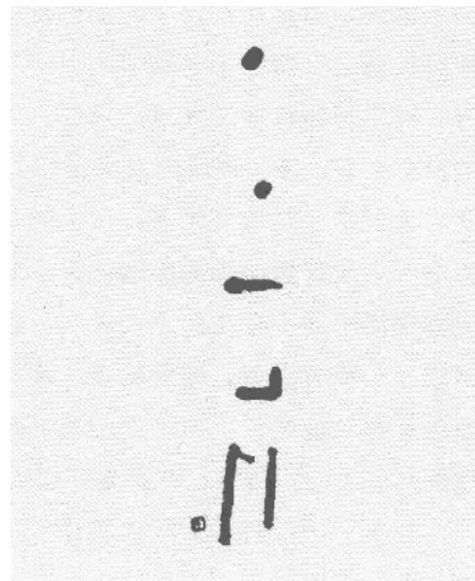


Fig3 Japanese avant-garde calligraphy

should modern calligraphy be proposed? It emphasizes that if calligraphy wants to enter the process of modernization, it should not only be related to the tradition, but also have the courage of "anti essence". Then, we return to the argument of the article - Chinese characters, what is the situation of the "writing" practice of "non Chinese characters"?

#### 3.1. Making Characters by Bai Qianshen

In the 1980s, a large number of western art theories came into China's art theory circle. For a time, formalism, expressionism and semiotics became the main methods for people to talk about art, and the abstract art features in calligraphy art also became the sign to explain that Chinese calligraphy preceded western art. In the first half of 1981, Bai Qianshen, who was studying at

Peking University, created some "characters" that did not exist in the history of Chinese characters according to the requirements of the physical characteristics and writing rules of Chinese characters (Figure 2).

However, as soon as this painting was produced, some students asked him what kind of character he wrote. Simultaneously, Bai Qianshen took to another Japanese avant-garde calligraphy work (Figure 3) to show them. This time, people no longer asked what kind of "character", but what kind of "symbol". Such an attempt made Bai Qianshen realize that in China, people limit their understanding of calligraphy art to a specific range. As long as it conforms to the physical characteristics of Chinese characters, people can appreciate the beauty of calligraphy. On the contrary, no one will treat it as a calligraphy work. Bai Qianshen's attempt proves the significance of Chinese characters in calligraphy. If we break away from Chinese characters or "Chinese character form", people's vision will enter another field, such as painting art. Although Chinese characters are also symbols, this symbol has become an indispensable symbol of calligraphy because of its specific structure.

### 3.2. *The Book of Heaven by Xu Bing*

In the late 1980s, Xu Bing created a *Book of Heaven* (Figure 5), which was composed of chaos and was not understood by anyone. There were upper and lower structures, left and right structures, and full surrounding structures in the works... Xu Bing consciously used the semiotics and visual modeling concepts, and successfully broke through the relatively chaotic domestic art concepts at that time, which successfully caught people's attention. It is said that at the time of the exhibition, some old gentlemen always wanted to read out some of the meanings from his works, because the works were so much like Chinese characters. He took out of all the meanings of "Chinese characters" in his works to give them zero readability, but strictly followed the structural rules of Chinese characters. Xu Bing said: "*The Book of Heaven* expresses my regret for the existing characters." After that, Xu Bing created "new English calligraphy". This time, he combined the symbols of English and the structure of Chinese characters, deconstructed the text itself again, and reconstructed people's thinking patterns of his works in the past. This time, he wrote a "dictionary" so that each symbol can find its corresponding meaning. Although he has many similarities with Bai Qianshen's initial attempt, Xu Bing's exploration of art practice never stops. When there is a system, a scale and a concept in art creation, its artistic effect will inevitably show itself. As for how to position it, it is no longer important to classify it into any specific art category. But what we can't deviate from is that if we want to do "calligraphy art", whether it's traditional, modern or post-modern, we need to make the bottom line clear. As for the debate on the concept of "modern calligraphy" among art theorists in the previous section, "Chinese characters" is the last piece of land that modern calligraphy guards.

The existence of Chinese characters does not prevent calligraphy from entering the boundary of modern art. The structure of Chinese characters seems to be the shackles of individual emotion, but it carries the core of structural rationality. In the process of writing, Chinese characters endow calligraphy with rich strokes and fit into different individual spirits. Therefore, Chinese characters are not the framework, but the support of our better display of this art. Its existence also provides more possibilities for the development of calligraphy art. Only in this way can we truly enter the modern transformation of calligraphy art.

### References

- [1] Gu Gan. Three Steps of Modern Calligraphy [M]. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 1992:4.
- [2] "The so-called 'Postmodern Principle', the western one should be a new way of feeling with the background of industry and post industrial society, highly developed personality and free spirit. It is intended to acquire the quality and creative consciousness of modern people. " Wang Dongling, editor in chief. *Selected papers on "modern calligraphy" in China* [M]. Hangzhou: China Academy of fine arts press, 2004:80.
- [3] Henry Home, Lord Kames. Elements of Criticism [M]. Edited and with an Introduction by Peter Jones, Liberty Fund, Inc, 2005: 141.