

中国 书法

Chinese
Calligraphy

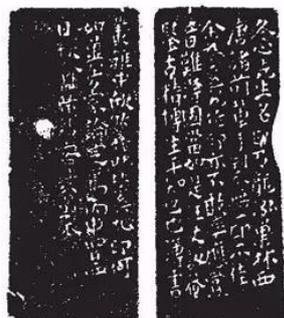
06

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翠玲珑 (附原石 印面 边款)
2.7 × 1.3cm



一笑百虑忘 (附边款)
2.0 × 2.0cm



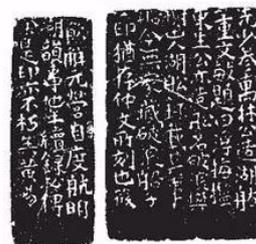
榕皋
1.75 × 1.8cm



奕画买山
2.5 × 2.5cm



小松所得金石 (附边款)
2.3 × 2.3cm



自度航 (附边款)
2.8 × 1.6cm

(The article was published 2018 / 06 in Chinese translation:

“从一个西方艺术家的视角看中国书法”)

A Western artists perspective on Chinese Calligraphy

Abstract:

Chinese / Asian Calligraphy has a double root, because on one side, it is based on words, language, communication, so it is a form of literary art, and on the other side it is a form of visual art, based on its graphic structures, proportions, visual appearance, etc. The literary and visual components are weaved tightly together and calligraphy has already a very long tradition in the Chinese civilization, therefore, it is very complex cultural phenomenon.

The production but also the (comprehensive) appreciation of calligraphy requires very specialized abilities and knowledge, which can just be acquired in years of studies and practice. Spectators without the correspondent educational background can just see and maybe appreciate the visual-aesthetic appearance of the calligraphy artworks, but they cannot understand the literary contents, not either the relation between text-content and visual appearance, or any cultural references.

Because of those high requirements as an artistic discipline, calligraphy, functions also as an element of cultural and social differentiation, of inclusion and of exclusion. It is a significant marker for the identity of certain communities in the Chinese society: Just the members of the Chinese political, economic and cultural elites have the possibilities to acquire the education and training to produce or to appreciate works of calligraphy, while the uneducated and poor – and the “barbarians” from different cultural backgrounds are excluded from understanding the real meaning of those artworks.

This study aims to analyze the relationship of the artistic character of Calligraphy with its social functions, and its role in intercultural exchanges.

The Author:

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Interaction and Communication

Human beings have many different forms of social interaction, the first and most direct is the immediate action: The active person realizes his intentions in a direct action, and by being subject to that actions, the second person will understand the first one's intentions. For example: One person pushes another person out of the room.

Another way to realize one's intentions concerning other persons lies in communication: In communication, the *sender* uses *signs* or symbolic actions to transmit a message to the *recipient*. Communication by symbolic actions, or signs

requires, that the addressee is perceiving those signs, and that he is understanding them in the way the sender intended them to be understood.

In principle, human beings can use all their senses for communication, therefore there are also many different mediums of communication. For example, without *olfactory communication (chemical, by smell)*, there would not be an industry of deodorants and perfumes! However, most of human communication is acoustic or visual.

In order to make the other person leave the room, (to go back to the simple example of the beginning) one could use a visual sign, a gesture with the hand, or one could *use language by saying* the words “get out!”

Acoustic signs are also used already by many animals already for communication, and they are often understood immediate, - often even beyond the border of species: For example, the warning snarling of a dog is understood very well by other animals or human beings too.

Just a few human acoustic expressions like laughter, weeping or shouting can be universally understood by other humans. The biggest part of acoustic communication is based on **language**. In the evolution of culture and civilization mankind has developed a huge number of different and complex languages. The right understanding and usage of languages is limited to those, people who have learned them well enough.

Communicating with language is an excellent, however, it requires not just that the speaker / sender and the listener / recipient speak the same language, but both must be at the *same time* at the *same place*!

Human beings are strongly visual oriented beings, and **visual communication** plays a big role in our lives. The seeing process consists of several steps filtering the optical signals arriving to the eyes, so that finally just a very small part of the visual stimulus appears in our consciousness and can trigger reactions. In that process, the recognition of visual patterns plays an imminent role.

Visual communication has also different levels: First, there is the appearance of a person, its movements, cloth etc., which convey already certain messages about the individual. Further, there are face-expressions and gestures, which often accompany and strengthen the messages of verbal communication, but which can also stand by themselves. (Person based visual communication)

And finally, as human beings, we are also able to reproduce artificially the visual patterns of the objects we are used to see; Human beings are able to produce **images**. – And other persons can often recognize the depicted things in the images again.

That is *object based visual communication*, because the sender produces an object, which is then carrying the message to the receiver.

In comparison to acoustic communication, object based visual communication (by images) has at advantage, that it is not requiring that sender and recipient are at the same time at the same place: the message of an image can be also recognized by other persons in different times and at different paces.

In the evolution of civilizations, the limitation of spoken language was compensated by its transformation into visual signs, first into images, which carry the meaning of words or which show or symbolize the objects, and finally in to **script!**

The different civilizations have developed different forms of scripts, the oldest ones focus more on the meaning-content of the language, combining recognizable images of objects with more abstract symbols, and younger ones used visual symbols to note the sounds of the spoken language.

Art is a basic element of human culture, there are no cultures, which have *not* certain elements, which can be interpreted to be art.

The origins of art are lying far way down in the human evolution, and to my view, they are related to the desire to understand and to manage better the world man lived in, – the same as - and close related to the origins of religions.

Anthropologists and pre-historians presume, that even the oldest preserved artworks, the prehistoric cave paintings, had for the people who produced them, certain transcendental, spiritual or magical functions.

In general, artworks have just symbolic and no direct practical functions. Artworks can be aimless individual expression or they can be directed to others, then they are a form of communication.

Literature as well as visual art helped human beings to transfer stories, ideas and knowledge from one individual to others and from one generation to the next over the time.

Also in our time, a common definition to differentiate art from not-art is, that artworks contain some message beyond their primary understanding (or function); that they have a (somehow) transcendent or spiritual level!

Chinese Calligraphy is a very special form of social interaction, of visual communication, of individual expression – and of art. It is a form of *visual art*, because of its graphic structures and the importance of its visual appearance. The same as it is a form of *literary art*, because it consists of language, words, text. Those two levels of calligraphy are tied together in the *script*, with its many different expressions.

Chinese calligraphy is a complex form of script- and text-based visual communication. Further it is based on a very long tradition and the huge heritage of Chinese culture, that's makes Chinese calligraphy very complex artistic discipline and it requires much of its spectators to understand it's to its profound depth.

Understanding works of art

The German / American Art historian *Erwin Panofsky* (1892 - 1968) ^{*1} had developed a largely recognized method to interpret, to understand and to appreciate artworks: He recommends proceeding in three steps:

1. (*pre-iconographic description*): Looking carefully to the painting, regarding and describing everything one can recognize.
2. (*iconography*): Interpreting of the conventional symbols, metaphors and attributes to understand motives and the themes of the artwork.

¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. pp. 5–9.

3. (*iconology*): Connecting the findings of the first two steps with all the biographical, historical, social, political, contexts of the artwork, which are relevant for understanding and appreciating the significance of the artwork.

Panofsky developed this instrument for the interpretation of classic artworks, (paintings of the Renaissance), therefore it assumes for artworks /paintings certain given and preset properties – for the artists as for the critic, and it is ignoring, that artworks can unfold effects also beyond figurative painting!

The classic painters shaped the messages of their work by creating figures, which interact in stories, evoking larger themes, - and by doing so, they positioned themselves in the artistic, cultural, contexts and traditions of their period and their region. While on the level of their figures, and themes, the artists worked intensively on the effects, they could hardly influence the interpretation of their work on the cultural, historical metalevels.

Many modern and contemporary artworks unfold the main part of their effects already on the choice of the material, - on the given structures, while they avoid creating anything which can be recognized (, turning towards abstraction).

On the other side, much of contemporary art appears very complex and almost incomprehensible, – by that, the artists force the spectators to interpret the art work, on psychological, social contextual or anthropological metalevels, far beyond the artwork itself.

Therefore, I enlarged the system of Panofsky and added some levels:

Artworks an unfold effects and convey messages

- 1.) on the level of used material, its aesthetic properties
- 2.) on the level of the manmade structures and forms and shapes
- 3.) on the level of recognizable forms, figures, things (Illusionism)
- 4.) on the level of illustrating a story, a theme,
- 5.) on the level of the interpretation of the theme
- 6.) on the level of the historical, cultural and biographical contexts
- 7.) on the level of psychological, contextual and anthropological reflections on human nature, society, culture and civilization.

Relationship of Calligraphy to other artistic disciplines

When I spoke the first time to students studying calligraphy in China, I asked what kind of texts they were writing, and I was astonished to hear that they are not writing their own words, but that they usually copy given words from classic sources.

Therefore, and according to my Westerners concepts of art, calligraphy appears less as a free artistic expression, (not like a free drawing, which is creating something, which had not been there before), but as a re-creating or an interpreting art-form, best to be compared with the European classical music.

The European classical musicians have also to study and practice for long years to master their instruments to reach a certain level. A good number of persons can reach the level to make some pleasant music, but just a few have sufficient talents and ambitions to become soloists or even stars. Still the classical musicians play always the classical music, even when it is just to try out the sound of an instrument,

- and they are rarely tempted to play own melodies, or things from very different musical traditions.

Also, the listeners have to have a high level of experience and education in order to appreciate or even judge about the different interpretations of the given classical music pieces.

I believe that those characteristics are rather similar to the Chinese Calligraphy: First the performer / calligrapher has to study and practice for long times to reach a certain level. And then the reader must have a high education and sophisticated experience too to read, understand and to enjoy calligraphy on its various levels, before being able to judge its quality.

Still, I think that Chinese calligraphy is more complex than European classical music, since it relies on the vast cultural heritage of Chinese language, literature and history. The European classical music can be appreciated easier on a pure sensual level, the symphonies of Beethoven or Brahms, they base just on the rules and traditions of European *Music*, and have no direct references to *philosophical* or *philological* sources as Calligraphy often has.

The fact, that European classical Music is easier accessible, shows in the large number of people from Asia study Western instruments and find access to the musical traditions of Europe too. Asian Art and music universities teach those European musical traditions, and many Asian musicians (of Western classical instruments) reached highest professional levels, became even stars. On the other side, I have not heard about Europeans or Americans who studied Chinese calligraphy in their countries, or about any Chinese Calligraphy course in a Western art college.

Apart from the easier or more difficult access to the depth of those cultural disciplines, this difference might result also out of certain old ideas of superiority and inferiority between Asia and Europe, established since colonial times.

I recognize, that Calligraphy is an important form of art in Chinese and East Asian cultures. Chinese Calligraphy is *exclusive* product of the Chinese culture and has already a very long tradition, so that it will be one of the oldest vital art forms of mankind.

Limited access

When I, a contemporary artist with European/German background, enter an exhibition of Chinese Calligraphy, I see that there is an artistic and cultural manifestation, following certain rules and conventions. In the different exhibits I can see certain differences in touch, in composition and structure of the works, and some appear more and others less expressive. However, I am not familiar with the rules and conventions of Chinese calligraphy.

Beside of a few isolated characters, I am not able to or to read or to speak Chinese, Therefore, I am excluded of the understanding of all the lingual and text-immanent levels of calligraphy artworks, and even more, of understanding the transcendent levels of the text, referring to the cultural traditions of this artform or to anything else.

However, I assume, that exactly those levels are the most important ones for that discipline, - probably in their combination with the visual ones, which I can see, but not fully appreciate without understanding the other components.

Calligraphy, is a form of *visual art*, the same as it is a form of *literary art*. Its visual qualities are accessible to some extent for the outsiders, its literary qualities are reserved for those with superior capacities of Chinese language and culture.

I feel that I can access just a very small part of the meaning of those artworks.

When I try to apply the above presented method of understanding artworks to Chinese Calligraphy, I can note, that for the first level, that the *choice of material*, it is hardly used to shape the effect of calligraphy, - except for its implicated references to the tradition when using ink on paper.

However, calligraphy artworks unfold much of their effects on the second level, the *level of the manmade structures*, forms and shape; with its visual graphic appearance, the contrasts, with the lines, their strength, their flow, the proportions, composition etc.

I can see and appreciate something about the

- Choice of tools used,
- Size
- Scale
- Proportions
- Composition
- expression of dynamism and elegance
- Relationship between different forms and signs,
- The addition or integration of images,
- Usage of color
- Etc.

Some of those visual properties convey impressions of order, chaos, energy, aggression, elegance, or even of clumsiness.

Here ends the pure visual character of calligraphy, and with the recognition and reading of the Chinese characters the literary qualities of the calligraphy carry their part of the effects. I cannot access:

- The characters /words and their meaning,
- The direct content of the text,
- eventually the poetic forms,
- The possible metaphorical understandings of the text,
- the sounds of the language when spoken,
- the usage of special stylistic expressions or of grammar indicating the specific regional or temporal origin of the text.

Those literal levels of calligraphy change over smoothly to the metalevels of the integration into the cultural context of the *traditions of Chinese Calligraphy*, of which I feel also excluded:

- the application or mastering of the traditional techniques
- the choice of patterns and writing styles,

- the choice of (existing) texts, (quotations) or
- the creation of a new text
- references to the various traditions in Chinese calligraphy

I assume, that calligraphy has here and in the cross references of visual appearance, text, and cultural contexts its strongest effects. Those references to the culture and tradition are integrating the producers as well as the appreciators of calligraphy into a certain part of the Chinese society.

When I look at Calligraphy, I can take distanced, anthropological viewpoints like “It is interesting that the Chinese cultivate their writing in this form and make it a form of art...”

Because I cannot access the direct meanings and intentions expressed in calligraphy artworks, I feel more attracted to reflect about the artform of calligraphy as such, on the various Meta-levels:

- The contexts of its historical and cultural and developments in the Chinese civilization
- Its role in the current (Chinese) culture
- Its role in the society
- significance from an anthropological viewpoint.

(All artworks can be regarded and analyzed also on such distanced meta-level.)

Such perspectives will not be relevant for the Chinese calligraphy communities, but they come up to me – and probably to others too, when thinking as outsider about the phenomena of Chinese Calligraphy.

Artwork unfold certain effects also in the way they are presented: The effect of a calligraphy will be rather different, if it is:

- On the desk in a classroom,
- In a calligraphy exhibition
- In a museum
- In a restaurant
- In a representative room, hall, in a temple or in a public office
- If it is transformed into the inscription of a building, or monument
- etc.

On the level of its presentations, also me, I can get again *some feelings* about the important meaning or value of a calligraphy, however, since I assume that I miss the message-contents completely, I stay uncertain about the works significance in its context.

Functions of Art and of Calligraphy

Art and culture, create communities. People, who enjoy and appreciate certain artistic expressions and share that experience, feel included in such a cultural community, and those who do not appreciate, – because they do not understand or like, – they are excluded of that cultural community.

According to the modern Western understanding of art, artworks have not any direct practical use / function. That idea derives from the long process of the emancipation of the arts. From the Renaissance on, the artists aimed to achieve a higher social status in society, better than that of craftsmen. Therefore, especially during the 19th and early 20th century, they strived to liberate art of all the different functions and purposes art could serve -or be used for- beyond art itself.

Nicely worked, aesthetically appealing and valuable objects like furniture, weapons, musical instruments or a clothing, are not understood on the same level as artworks as paintings or sculptures. Such objects are seen as “*Kunsthandwerk*” (in German language) as “art and craft-objects”, because their purpose is a functional one of practical use.

However, also without having any practical use, artworks have several layers of function:

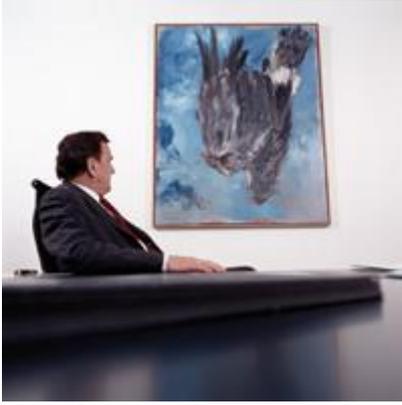
For the artists, art functions as means of personal expression, as a medium of communication, – and his art serves the artist as the means to claim his rank and a social status in society to get respected, adored or to become famous, and last not least, art is the artists livelihood!

For the recipients (the collector, owner, spectator, audience, reader etc.) artworks can function as decoration and / or as a sensual and intellectual inspiration, enriching their life. Beyond that, a person can demonstrate with his ownership of artworks, but also already with the ability to appreciate and to enjoy certain works of art, his/her social distinction, his/her/their sensible and intellectual superiority, and last not least their wealth and power!

When thinking about art, many people ignore its important role as *status symbol*! In his book “*Mit dem Rücken zur Kunst*” (“with the back to the art”) the German art-historian Wolfgang Ulrich² explains very well this function of art, by analyzing press-pictures of powerful people. The portraits of such persons are often taken in front of artworks, and the attributed character of the artwork is used to shape the impression of the portraited person.

When a politician poses in front of a roughly expressively painted painting showing an eagle upside-down, he demonstrates with that picture, that he is very open, modern and progressive, that he will bring big, sweeping changes; especially, if one takes to account, that the eagle is also the country’s symbol of state-power!

² Wolfgang Ulrich, *Mit dem Rücken zur Kunst*, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, Berlin, 2000



The German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social-Democratic Party of Germany, SPD), in office from 1998 until 2005), posed 2003 in his office in front of the painting “Finger-painting III -Eagle” of Georg Baselitz.

Foto: Werner Bartsch © Werner Bartsch, Hamburg

Picture of „Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, http://www.dhm.de/archiv/ausstellungen/machtzeigen/gerhard_schroeder.html

When a business manager poses in front of a “avant-gardist, progressive, innovative, creative” work of art, he underlines, his personal “avant-gardist, progressive, innovative and creative” qualities as manager.



Rolf-Ernst Breuer in front of a painting of Günther Förg, 1997

Foto: Wolfgang von Brauchitsch

© Photoagentur v. Brauchitsch

Picture of „the website of Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin,

<http://www.dhm.de/archiv/ausstellungen/machtzeigen/unternehmensstrategien.html>

The artwork in the photography – or in the real office / space - of the politician, manager or other representative of the “elite”, are often not simply looking nice, because of their complex concepts they often appear more rough and ugly, and therefore they are difficult to appreciate for people who are not familiar with such art.

That difficulty to appreciate this art, might even amplify the feeling of social difference between the visitor (spectator of the picture) and the person (in the picture) owning that work of art. Different to the visitor, the portraited person (or owner of the artwork) has the sensibility, the education the knowledge to understand and to appreciate such work of art, and he has also the cultivation and wealth to own it!

Like this, a rough and incomprehensible artwork can intimidate the spectator and the same time underline the superiority of its owner!

In the context of advertisement as in the context art the term “exclusivity” is often used as a positive value: while the majority is excluded, the addressee of this term can feel flattered to be included (to the elite).

Many forms of contemporary art are very “exclusive” because just very few specialized persons can understand and appreciate them.

Also, Chinese Calligraphy is an *exclusive* form of art, because it requires not just much talent, skill and training of its producers but also much of knowledge, sensibility and experience of its spectators / readers, and it excludes all the uneducated, unsensitive and unexperienced.

Because, until the 20th century, in China, literacy and higher education was exclusively found within the elites, just the privileged could deal with calligraphy, so that for the longer part of Chinese history, the majority of the population, – the uneducated, the peasants, the poor–, were excluded of the understanding and appreciation of calligraphy artworks!

When those uneducated people were confronted with writing and even with calligraphy, – for example hanging scrolls at the wall behind the table of the magistrate, they knew that it was meaningful without knowing the meaning, – like that the calligraphies served to intimidate them and to underline the superiority of those, who presented themselves with those writings: The calligraphy writings confirm the existing power relationships or they function even as an emblem of power!



Yamen- Court procedure, Qing dynasty, 1889. Photo attributed to Thomas Saunders (1832 - 1892) The picture aims to capture the atmosphere at the magistrate, it might be authentic or

it might be reenacted in the photographers studio, however, it shows calligraphy in a specific function of social distinction! (source: Wickimedia, copyright: public domain)³

The scrolls with writing behind the officials have of course certain decorative functions, but they serve much more as the emblem of authority, as the sign of distinction and superiority of the person and of the institution, to which the visitors must submit, - if they understand the meaning of the signs – and even more, if not!

But calligraphy cannot just serve to separate the elite from the lower classes, it also helped to shape the elites themselves:

Also from the members of the elite, calligraphy is requiring long periods of learning and of *exercising*. After acquiring the (not so simple) basic writing abilities, calligraphers must train in long exercises their writing skills to achieve improvement, sophistication or even mastership.

In his book “*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*” (French: *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*) the French philosopher and social theorist *Michel Foucault* (1926-1984)⁴, analyses also the practices of intensive exercising.

The interest of Foucault lies in the transformation of power: In older times (until the 16th century) the state-power was rather violent and visible, but it was not very systematic and had a limited reach. Due to the rationalistic ideas of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, the power increased the same time as it became less visible and less violent. It became more subtle and systematic and expanded its reach deep into the sphere of the individual, and it developed already totalitarian ambitions. In this context Foucault describes “*exercising*” as an integral element of establishing discipline and order. The intensive exercises have the sense, to reshape the individual to a controllable and functional element of the social body and to keep it in permanent submission to the dominating power.

Foucault focused his regard on the forced exercising and drill in military, schools, hospitals, prisons or factories of France and Europe specially during the 18th century. However, also the voluntary – or less forced exercises in cultural fields can be interpreted as a submission to the authority of the existing socio-cultural system. When the student is spending significant parts of his time practicing, – if that is the young Western pianist, or if that is the Chinese calligrapher – the student accepts the values and norms associated with that cultural practice and aims to fulfill them. With his progress, the student is not just taking over, but deeply embodying those norms and values, generally without reflecting or doubting them ever!

The Chinese civilization is the only human civilization, which developed in the antiquity, and kept on its development without collapsing (as completely), as the

³ The calligraphy scrolls in the background seem to contain the writing of Deng Shirú (邓石如), who lived ca. 1739/1743 -1805. The text is “春風大雅能容物，秋水文章不染塵”. I received the translation: “the wind of spring is great to contain all things, the article like water of fall that keep away from dust”; that is still very difficult to understand as the metaphoric expressions of *personality* and *knowledge*.

⁴ I read the German version of the text: Michel Foucault, *Überwachen und Strafen- die Geburt des Gefängnis*, translated by Walther Seitter, Suhrkamp, 1977 (original: *Surveiller et punir La naissance de la prison*. Editions Gallimard, 1975), p. 201 ff.

other ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Rome or of the Inca or Maya. The unique conservation of Chinese civilization and culture has one important base in the writing, which developed early, and the writing developed to the art-form of calligraphy.

Chinese calligraphy appears to be a conservative cultural / artistic practice, mainly aiming to preserve and reproduce the old traditional contents in the traditional styles and techniques. It plays an important role in the long conservation and preservation and affirmation of Chinese culture and civilization.

Calligraphy is not just suited to carry on the wisdom and poetry, to strengthen and continue the long tradition, but also to stabilize the established social structures, including the distribution of status, wealth and power.

Cultural exchanges

Because China has been for more than 2500 years the dominating power in East Asia, the neighboring countries have taken over with many other elements of the Chinese culture also the writing, and calligraphy traditions. However, I am not in the position to compare or even to judge the differences of Japanese, Korean and Chinese Calligraphy.

When in the 16th, 17th and 18th century with the trade also direct cultural exchanges began to flourish between Europe and China, the European elites were fascinated about China, but their interest focused on tea, silks, and especially on porcelain (*which is often still named China!*).

King August II of Saxony, *August the Strong* (1670 -1733), for example build up a respectable collection of Chinese /Asian porcelains. He also invested much into research to produce similar porcelain products in Europe.⁵

In those early periods of cultural exchanges between Europe and China, the products from China, which were very fashionable for the European elites, were fine crafted - and had an “exotic” design, – so they had an aesthetic side, and, and they had a functional side too. That was in some that ways similar to the double character of calligraphy. However, the functional side of a porcelain cup or plate, of a silk-textile was much easier to understand and to appreciate – and to use –, for the Europeans than the *literal functions* of calligraphy, – so there was no special interest in calligraphy at that time.

When in the early 20th century the global exchanges increased and the European modernism began to explore the possibilities of abstract art, some European / Western artists also began using Asian calligraphy as a reference.

Those cultural transfers and new interpretations occurred especially since the 1950th. (Tachism France, 1940th -1960th, Informel: Germany and France, 1950th -1960th) However, because of its complexity as literal and visual art, Western visual artists, absorbed and transferred just the visual elements of Chinese / Asian calligraphy into their own art and leaving away the literal levels of calligraphy. They found inspiration mainly in the graphical appearance, of abstract gestures, controlled spontaneity etc..

⁵ In 1708 the alchemist Johan Friedrich Böttger (1682-1719) discovered as a captive of the king of Saxony a formula to produce the first “white porcelain” in Europe, followed by the establishment of the still existing manufacture *Meissen Porcelain manufacture*.

The choice of black on white, the dynamism of gestures and produced structures of artists like Franz Kline (1910 – 1962), Pierre Soulages (*1919), K.R.H. Sonderborg, (1923 -2008) or K.O.Götz (1914 -2017) is seen generally related to some forms of oriental calligraphy.



K.R.H. Sonderborg, (1923 -2008), untitled, 1959, Image source: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/zen-for-head/images/3/>

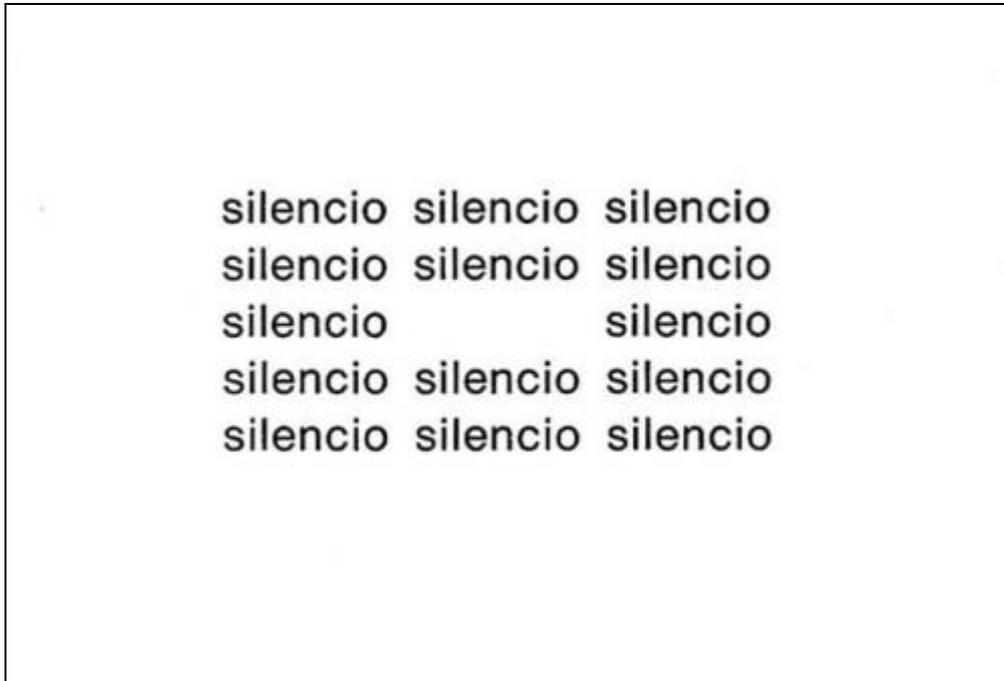


K. O. Götz (1914 -2017), Riemu, 1968
(Photo: Jan Schüler, CC BY-SA 3.0 de, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=23399772>)

The literal elements of Chinese calligraphy are excluding people from outside of the Chinese culture much stronger. Therefore, those elements are much more difficult to transfer to other cultures, and I do not know any examples.

However, there are a few parallel developments in Western culture, where textual and visual expressions are combined:

One example is the "*Konkrete Poesie*", (*concrete poetry*, also named *visual poetry* or *shape poetry*) where the (printed) appearance of the poems text conveys its message, or big parts of it.



"silencio" (silence), 1954, by Eugen Gomringer (*1925)
<http://www.literaturundkunst.net/eugen-gomringer-der-wortverzauberer/>

Here, in this example the "missing word", the interruption of the row underlines and creates the silence, the poem aims to express. Like in calligraphy, literal and visual qualities are weaved together, however I would not dare to construct any direct influences or connections from Chinese calligraphy to the Western visual poetry.

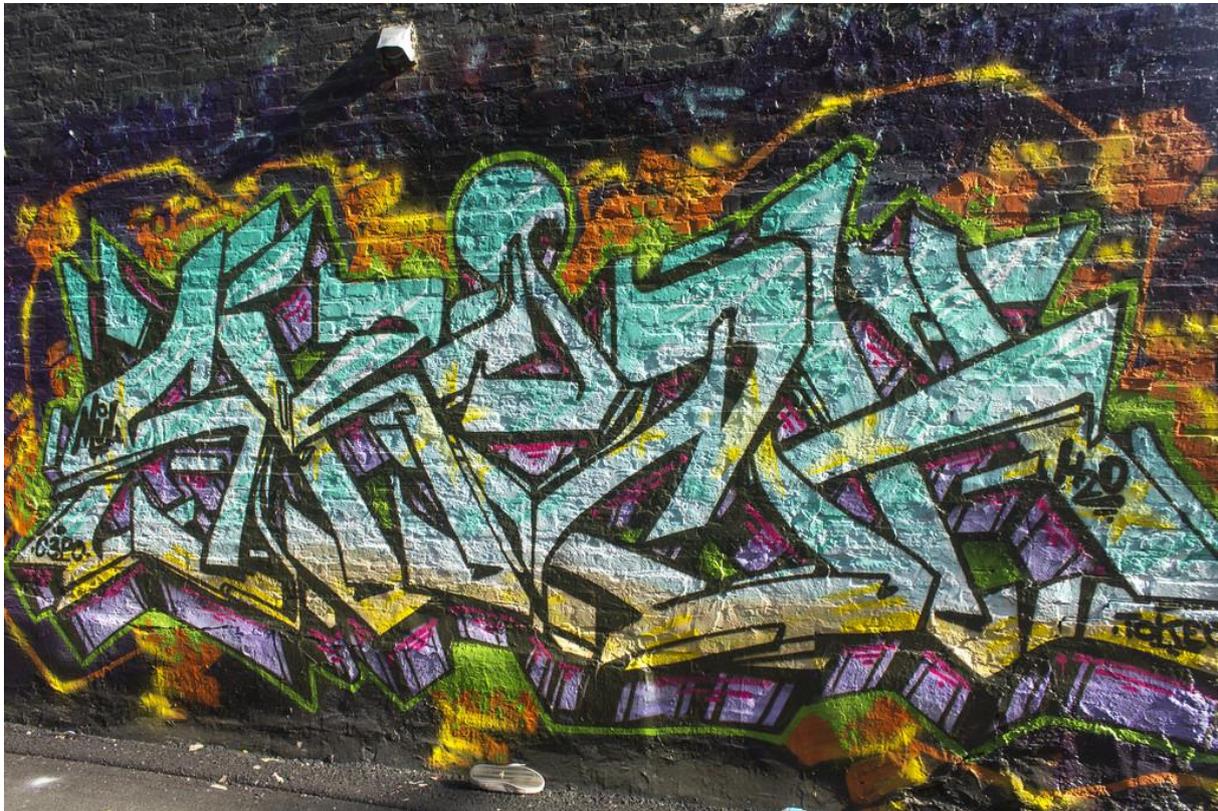
Another example for a fusion of visual and textual expression is the Western graffiti-culture, which developed since the 1970th as an illegal youth-subculture. It had not just an impact on the visual appearance of Western cities, but also on the visual art-scenes.



(Photo: Ingo Baumgarten, Lille, France, 2005)

This graffiti is clearly based on writing, - however the visual appearance transports as much of the final effect as the letters, – especially, since the letters do not make sense for people outside of the (local) graffiti-scene.

Many graffities are transforming the letters in ways, that they become almost unreadable:



It is not easy to recognize the letters "SKETCH" in this graffiti of LurrkGod, (Photo: Rodosow on Flickr)

I see in this phenomenon effects of an *intended exclusiveness*, - which exists also in other youth- and subcultures too: excluding the outsiders, who not belong to the

scene, but aiming to impress the insiders, who can read, understand appreciate such tags. Within the scene, the producer of such sophisticated but illegal graffiti gains respect for the aesthetic appearance of his tag the same as for the bravery to place it without permission in the cityscape.

Contemporary exchanges between East and West

Since the 1970th, numerous Westerners felt dissatisfied with the straight forwardness of the western-modernist societies and yearned for some less materialistic, more spiritual alternatives. Many turned to the religions and philosophies of Asian cultures, to find there the magic and mysterious revelation of old religions and rediscovery of the self.

Most of them did not reach deeper understandings of the Asian spirituality. However, for certain people it is also attractive to deal with alien, obscure or incomprehensible ideas, because then, they can project meanings upon, which satisfy the personal desires, but which are not necessarily part of the original sense!

With this mechanism, the West perceived and adopted certain parts of Asian cultures. – Chinese characters are still among the most fashionable motives in the Western tattoo studios.

A good number of Westerners, including some visual artists, have approached Asian Culture by religion and martial arts. (for example, the French Artist Yves Klein (1928 - 1962), had been a master of Judo, - and became a leading figure towards minimalism in art)

Parallel, artists from Asia had some success in the West, and introduces a few elements of the original Asian cultures into the western contemporary art-scene, they assimilated to.

Very famous and innovative had been the Korean Paik Nam June

白南準 (1932 – 2006), who became very innovative as contemporary artist, – maybe because of his different cultural and educational backgrounds. He started as pianist, musicologist, then composer, turning to avantgarde performances and finally to video art, he stepped over several boundaries of artistic disciplines and he expanded their expressive possibilities. However, especially some of his earlier works show references to traditional Asian culture including calligraphy:



Nam June Paik, "Zen for head", 1962

In 'Zen for Head', Paik dipped his head into ink and draws a line on paper – in this way he connected his radical action with Asiatic calligraphy.

Many Western artists refer in some ways to Asian spirituality, but those references are most times not really clear and overlaid with others. But for some artists those references are very evident, for example for Wolfgang Laib (*1950 in Germany), who's artistic philosophy roots in far-eastern philosophies and religion. His works, which are often classified as Minimal- or Land-art, use natural material like pollen, beeswax, rice and marble, and they have meditative and contemplative character.



Wolfgang Laib, (*1950) at the installation of a work with bowls and rice
(image source: <https://wsimag.com/art/34976-wolfgang-laib>)

Conclusion

Because of “permanent innovation” is one of the most important features of *Western International Contemporary Arts*, it will continue to search for stimulation, inspiration and sources outside of its original areas, to progress.

Absorbing elements from different cultures into the Western Contemporary Arts has been common. It is possible, that Western contemporary artists reinterpret and absorb some elements of Asian calligraphy in the future again, however, because Chinese Calligraphy is so complex and such an exclusive element of *Chinese* culture, I cannot imagine, that it might have a deeper impact on the tendencies of the International Contemporary Art.

Ingo Baumgarten, Seoul, February 2018

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