

What is “Chinese Modern Calligraphy”?

An Exploration of the Critical Debate on Modern Calligraphy in Contemporary China

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Since the mid-1980s Chinese calligraphy art has undergone a radical change and has opened itself to experimentation. Nowadays in China this artistic revolution has sparked a vivid debate among the art critics on three main topics: (1) definition of the phenomenon; (2) analysis of its nature; and (3) classification of the artistic production. In this article, all these aspects are analysed in order to give a comprehensive view of the present theoretical discussion and of its future development.

Keywords: Chinese Modern Calligraphy (CMC), contemporary China, art critic, critical debate, modernity, contemporary art, modern art

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s Chinese calligraphy art has undergone a radical change and has opened itself to experimentation. Calligraphy has gradually lost its connection with Chinese language and has gradually strayed from the concept of traditional aesthetics which consists of strict rules and stylistic standards that have never changed over centuries. From the end of the 1990s, in China this artistic revolution has sparked a vivid debate on “Modern Calligraphy” among the art critics. In order to give an overview of the different critical positions emerged until now, to systematize this fragmented and complex matter, and to define a periodization of the evolution of the theoretical discussion, it is fundamental to distinguish the main debate topics, and to analyze each of them in the details. Three are the main topics of the critical debate on “modern calligraphy” in China nowadays: (1) definition of the phenomenon; (2) analysis of its nature; and (3) classification of the artistic production.

The Definition of the Phenomenon

As to the first point, it is known that the expression commonly used by Chinese scholars to describe the transformation process of contemporary calligraphy is *Zhōng guó xiàn dài shū fǎ* 中国现代书法 (“Chinese modern calligraphy”—CMC). This formula was first used in the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy” (*Zhōng guó xiàn dài shū fǎ shǒu zhǎn* 中国现代书法首展), held in October 1985 at the National

Art Museum of China in Beijing.¹ But, what do we mean exactly when we say “Chinese Modern Calligraphy”? This expression consists of three different words: *Zhōng guó*, *xiàn dài*, and *shū fǎ*. In order to understand their exact meaning in the context we are referring to, we need to analyze each of the words separately.

As to the first word, *Zhōng guó* (“China”), the problem is: Do we want to refer only to People’s Republic of China (P.R.C.) or also to Taiwan? Has Hong Kong to be considered or not? What about the overseas Chinese (*hǎi wài de Huá rén* 海外的华人) artistic production? QU (2008) explains that the word *Zhōng guó* is used only to distinguish “Chinese Modern Calligraphy” from “Japanese Modern Calligraphy” (*Rì běn xiàn dài shū fǎ* 日本现代书法). He says that even if Chinese modern calligraphy was influenced by the Japanese one, the differences between them are evident in many fundamental aspects, so what is important is to underline the “Chinese” features of the new calligraphic forms. When QU Li-feng uses the term *Zhōng guó*, he wants to refer to the concept of *Zhōng guó xìng* 中国性 “Chineseness, Chinese nature”. When he analyzes the modern calligraphic production, his focus is on the selection of the artworks which clearly present Chinese characteristics, and it is not important if the artists come from P.R.C., Hong Kong, Taiwan or foreign countries. QU Li-feng’s point of view is the most popular among the Chinese art critics,² whose way of thinking is extremely influenced by the Chinese concept of *hé hé wén huà* 和合文化 “harmonious and integrated culture”.³ Their attempt is to minimize the geographical differences and to bring everything back to the typicality and specificity of the Chinese culture. In recent years, a few attempts to analyze separately the artistic production of specific cultural areas have emerged, for example, for Taiwan (HUANG, 2011) and Hong Kong (XU, 2010), but when the Chinese scholars refer to *Zhōng guó* these areas are automatically included. The focus is always on “continental China” (*Zhōng guó dà lù* 中国大陆) and on P.R.C. artists, and the other areas are marginalized and never distinguished. Actually, the problem is not the inclusive approach, but the negation of the presence of specific characteristics from the artists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas, because they belong to cultural background different from the “Chinese” one.⁴

Then, when we use the word *xiàn dài*, do we refer to a temporal indicator or to a cultural one?⁵ If we consider *xiàn dài* as a temporal indicator, we should immediately think of the starting date of “modern age” in China, which is the fourth May 1919, but, as to CMC, none of the Chinese art critics refer to this date:

¹ For a more detailed description of the artworks displayed in the exhibition, see the exhibition catalogue: WANG Xue-zhong (1986), *XIANDAI SHUFA—Xiandai shuhua xuehui shufa shoujie zuopin xuan* 现代书法—现代书画学会书法首届作品选, Beijing: Beijing Sport University Press. For a detailed reconstruction of the exhibition planning process and of the different phases of the exhibition, see PU Lie-ping & GUO Yan-ping (2005), *Zhongguo xiandai shufa dao hanzi yishu jianshi* 中国现代书法到汉字艺术简史, Chengdu: Sichuan Fine Arts Press, pp. 19-24. This exhibition represented the birth of the whole movement of the so-called “Chinese modern calligraphy”.

² The only exception seems to be the approach by YANG Ying-shi (YANG, 2004), because at the beginning of his article he distinguishes the homeland of each artist. But this is only an apparent exception, because when he then classifies their artistic production, he forgets this distinction and conforms his approach to the others.

³ For further information about this concept, see CHEN (2010), “‘Harmonious and Integrated Culture’ and the Building and Communication of China’s National Image” (pp. 148-154).

⁴ Just to give two examples of this approach, see ZHANG Ai-guo (ZHANG, 2007) and LIU Can-ming (LIU, 2010). In their works, both of these scholars give a clear definition of the terms *xiàn dài* and *shū fǎ*, but they don’t mention the term *Zhōng guó*. In the classification of the artistic production, they name artists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas, but they are marginalized and they neither distinguish them from the other artists from P.R.C. nor highlight their specific cultural features.

⁵ To understand the complexity of this question, just think that Chinese scholars organized a whole conference to debate this only question. For more details, see QIU Zhen-zhong (2004), *Yuanzi shufa—Dui yilei yishu de mingming yu qita* 源自书法—对一类艺术的命名与其他 (p. 276).

Someone considers the year 1881 (CHEN, 1996), someone else the year 1949 (LI & LIU, 2009; LU, 2004), and most of them indicate the year 1985 (PU & GUO, 2005; LIU, 2010; YANG, 2009; FU, 1998; ZHANG, 1998; SHEN, 2001; CHEN, 2005). Why these different dates? Maybe, it is because *xiàn dài* is not used as a temporal indicator but as a cultural one, as ZHU Qing-sheng (ZHU, 2000, 2004) and ZHANG Ai-guo (ZHANG, 2007) point out. In particular, ZHU Qing-sheng focuses on the difference between the terms *xiàn dài yì shù* 现代艺术 “modern art” and *dāng dài yì shù* 当代艺术 “contemporary art” to explain the exact meaning of the word *xiàn dài* in the expression *Zhōng guó xiàn dài shū fǎ*. He argues that:

As to art, the “modern stage” (*xiàn dài yì shù jī è duàn*) [...] begins when revolutionary ideas emerge, new concepts appear, and artworks completely different from classical (or traditional) ones come to light. When we use the expression *dāng dài yì shù* 当代艺术 (contemporary art) [...] we can also refer to classical forms and concepts shaped in the present times, while when we refer to *xiàn dài yì shù* 现代艺术 “modern art” this can never happen. (p. 159)

According to ZHU Qing-sheng, the term *xiàn dài* means “something opposite to tradition”: It is a cultural indicator of something that is changing in contemporary China. Most of Chinese art critics agree with ZHU Qing-sheng’s point of view (GAN, 1992; FU, 2001; SHENG, 2004; LIU, 2010), and among them, LIU Can-ming (2010) best sums up this concept:

The word *xiàn dài* means both “modern times” and “modern culture”. The expression “modern calligraphy” (*xiàn dài shū fǎ*) contains two fundamental connotations: one is temporal, the other is cultural. (p. 4)

But if *xiàn dài shū fǎ* rejects traditional forms, can it be still considered “calligraphy”?

Regarding to “calligraphy”, to the term *shū fǎ*, the problem is: Is it possible to identify some of the so-called “modern calligraphy” artworks, for example, those in Figure 1 and 2, as “calligraphy”? The main question is that while traditional calligraphy has always been at the same time a “verbal art” as well as an “abstract art” (ZHANG, 1998), the “art of writing characters” (*xiě zì yì shù* 写字艺术) as well as the “art of writing lines” (*xiàn tiáo yì shù* 线条艺术) (LIU, 2010), in recent years, instead, calligraphy has split into two parts and sometimes has become a “verbal art” or an “abstract art”, the “art of writing (meaningful/un-meaningful) characters” (see Figure 1) or the “art of writing (abstract/painting-like) lines” (see Figure 2).

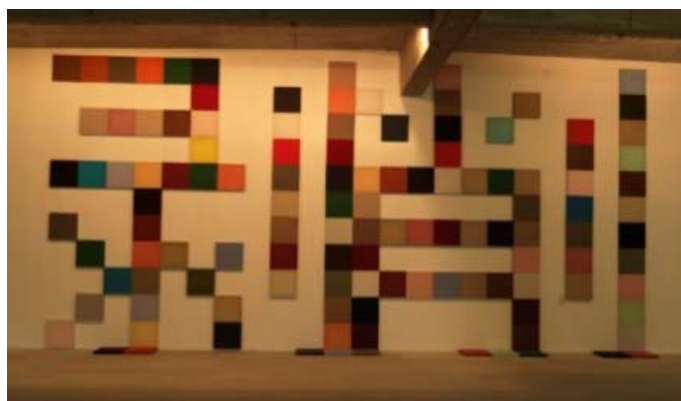


Figure 1. WU Shan-zhuan, *Color into exploitation* 色彩进入剥削, 2009, installation, Shanghai Songjiang Creative Studio, 2009.09.10-2009.09.14. Reproduced in: WANG Dong-ling (2011, p. V).



Figure 2. WEI Li-gang, *QiangWei Yuan Dong Luo Dao Chui* (The rosebush crawls around the entrance to the courtyard with a few vines dropping down), 2011, ink and acrylic on paper, 243 × 123cm, Goedhuis Contemporary Gallery. Source: Goedhuis Contemporary Gallery website.

As the result of this analysis, we can affirm that the definition of *shū fǎ* and the whole expression “Chinese Modern Calligraphy” are both inadequate and requires a deep revision.

Some Chinese scholars have tried to propose alternative definitions. Among them, the most important are:

- (1) “calligraphism” (*shū fǎ zhǔ yì* 书法主义, LUO, 1993);
- (2) “flexiblecalligraphy” (*jī dòng shū fǎ* 机动书法, ZHANG, 1993);
- (3) “anti-calligraphy” (*fǎn shū fǎ* 反书法/*fēi shū fǎ* 非书法/*wú zì shū fǎ* 无字书法/*fēi Hàn zì* 非汉字/*fēi Hàn zì shū fǎ* 非汉字书法, WANG, 1994; ZHANG, 1999; ZHU, 2000; QIAN, 2002);
- (4) “modern calligraphic experimentation” (*xiàn dài shū fǎ shì yǎn* 现代书法试验, ZHU, 2000);
- (5) “modern art of calligraphic nature” (*shū fǎ xìng xiàn dài yì shù* 书法性现代艺术, HONG, 2001);
- (6) “calligraphic art” (*shū yì* 书艺, CHEW, 2001);
- (7) “modern structuralist calligraphy” (*xiàn dài jié gòu zhǔ yì shū fǎ* 现代结构主义书法, QIAN, 2002);
- (8) “art from calligraphy” (*yuán zì shū fǎ yì shù* 源自书法艺术, QIU, 2004);
- (9) “avant-garde calligraphy” (*xiān fēng shū fǎ* 先锋书法, MA, 2004; *qián wèi shū fǎ* 前卫书法, LIU, 2008);
- (10) “post-modern calligraphy” (*hòu xiàn dài shū fǎ* 后现代书法, ZHU, 2004);
- (11) “art of Chinese characters” (*Hàn zì yì shù* 汉字艺术, PU, 2005);
- (12) “modern calligraphic appearance” (*xiàn dài shū xiàng* 现代书象, FU, 2011).

A detailed analysis of each of these definitions unfortunately shows that none of them properly defines the whole phenomenon of the so-called CMC. As a consequence for this, we can affirm that it is impossible to give a unitary label to an unstable, constantly changing and multi-faceted phenomenon as the one we are referring to. This is why I think it is necessary to overturn the standard definition passing from the definition “Chinese modern calligraphy” (*Zhōng guó xiàn dài shū fǎ*) to the definition “modernity of Chinese calligraphy” (in Chinese something similar to *Zhōng guó shū fǎ de xiàn dài xìng* 中国书法的现代性), obviously as regard to a contemporary context. Why this? Because it is “modernity” that allows the art of calligraphy to be so productive and changeable in contemporary times. The solution to the question is to identify and recognize how this modernity is interpreted in contemporary Chinese artworks, in order to illustrate the evolution of this ancient art in all of its forms.

The Analysis of the Nature of the So-called “Chinese Modern Calligraphy”

The second question is about the nature of the so-called “Chinese modern calligraphy” and the relation between modernity and tradition. The burning question for the art critics is: “Is the so-called CMC still calligraphy or not?”

As to this question, two are the main positions: (1) Professor WANG Dong-ling sustains that CMC is still calligraphy (WANG, 2005, 2011); (2) Professor WANG Nan-ming sustains that is not calligraphy yet (WANG, 1994, 2005). Even if these two positions seem to be alternative, both of them are valid and refer to two different approaches to the question: The first one refers to the modernists’ perspective, the second one to the avant-garde’s. When we speak of Chinese calligraphy, the phenomenon of modernity is like a Janus with two faces, the first one (the modernists’) is still looking to the past and the second one (the avant-garde’s) is looking to the future.⁶

Classification of the Artistic Production

The third question debated by the scholars focuses on the artistic production of the so-called CMC. The author has selected 24 different hypothesis of classification, 21 suggested by Chinese art critics (LI, 1991; ZHANG, 1998; FU, 1998; TAO, 1998; FU, 2000, 2004; SHEN, 2001; LUO, 1996, 2001; HONG, 2001; YANG, 2001, 2009; LANG, 2003; QIU, 2004; GAO, 2004; CHEN, 2005; LIU, 2006, 2008; CHENG, 2006; ZHANG, 2007; LIU, 2009; ZHU, 2009; HONG, 2010; WANG, 2010) and only three by non-Chinese scholars (CHEW, 2001; BARRASS, 2002; WEAR, 2008) (See Figure 3). In the table below, these hypotheses have been grouped into two categories, the first one written in Chinese language and the second one in Western language. As you can notice, almost only Chinese academic circles are involved in this debate.

If we look at Chinese references, we can argue that three are the pivotal points for the development of the discussion about the artistic production of the so-called CMC: 1998, 2001, and 2007. Starting from these three moments, it is possible to suggest a periodization of this critical debate in four stages (see Figure 4):

(1) The first one goes from the beginning of the 1990s to 1998. During this period, the first attempts to classify the artistic production of the so-called CMC are arisen. These classifications focus only on few aspects, have no scientific approach (there are no examples of artists and artworks), and use only two keywords to distinguish currents: *huì huà* “painting” (e.g., LI Xian-ting, 1991, who divides the modernist production into two mainstreams according to the different way in which calligraphy and painting interact in the artworks), or *Hàn zì* “Chinese characters” (e.g., LUO Qi, 1996, who divides the phenomenon of “calligraphism” in three different parts on the base of the manipulation of Chinese characters).

(2) The second stage goes from 1998 to 2000. In 1998, the first complete classification of the CMC is proposed by FU Qing-sheng, who divided the artistic production into five typologies (see Figure 5): (1) writing poems using Chinese characters; (2) freehand brushwork for no-characters works; (3) Fluid and passionate ink works; (4) conceptual works; and (5) calligraphic performance and installations. This classification perfectly reflects the situation of CMC at the end of the 1990s, even if it doesn’t consider the avant-garde movement which spread out abroad at the end of the 1980s.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the two perspectives, see Iezzi, A. (2013), “Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy between tradition and innovation” (pp. 163-165, 167-168).

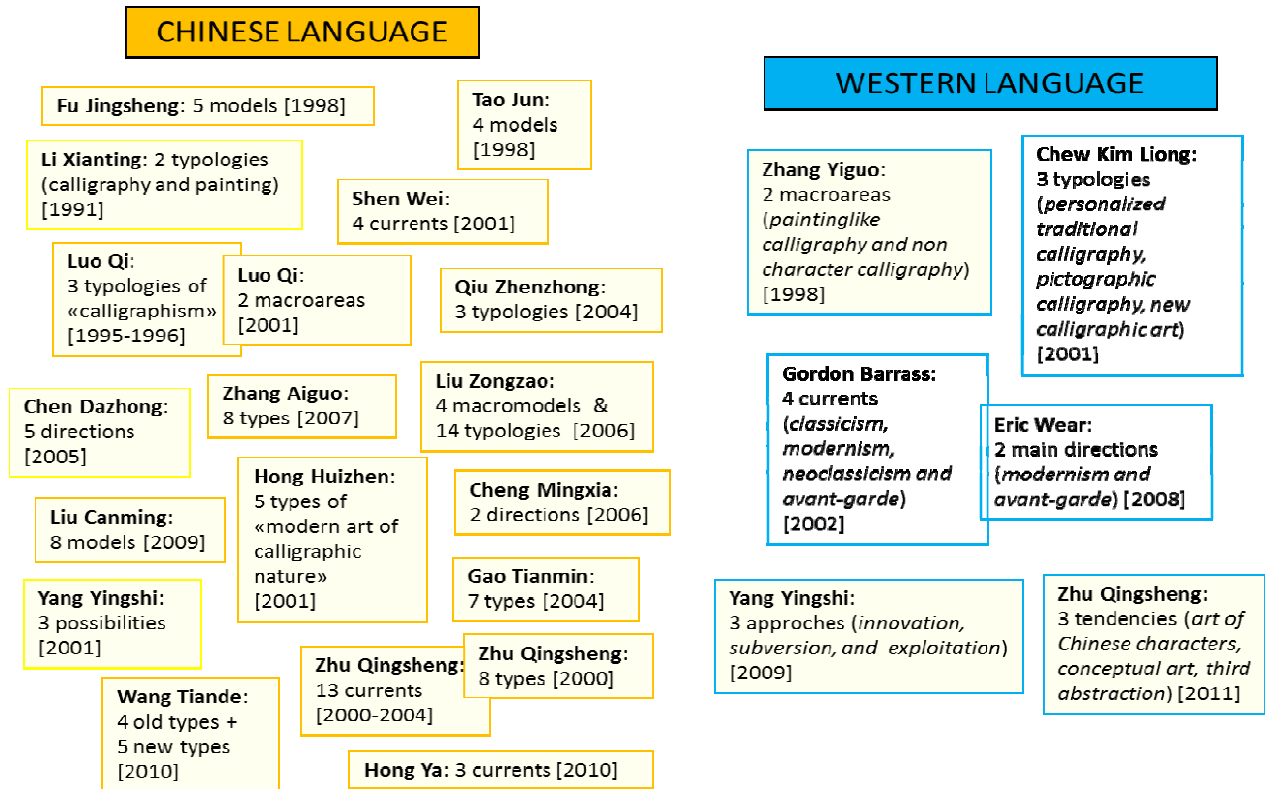


Figure 3. A schematic model of the main hypothesis of classification of the artistic production of the so-called “Chinese modern calligraphy” arranged by the author. The 24 different hypothesis have been grouped into two categories, the first 21 written in Chinese language (on the left, in orange) and the second six written in Western language (on the right, in light blue). The boxes colored in light orange contain classifications proposed by Chinese scholars.

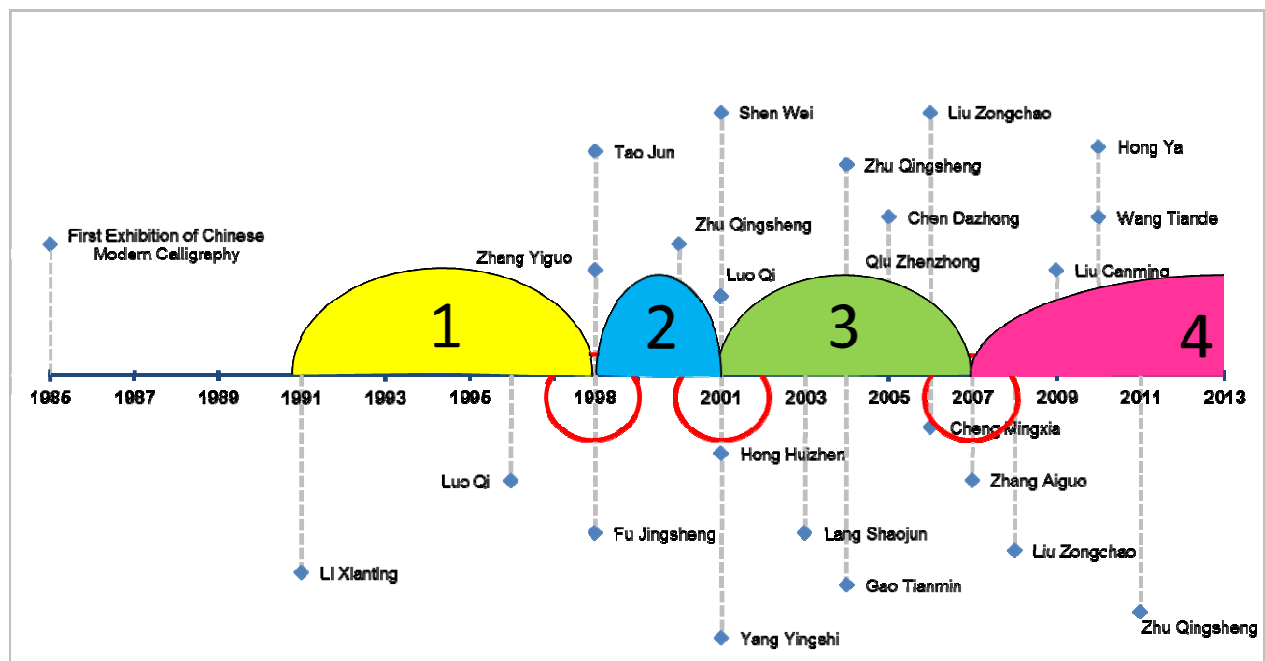


Figure 4. Timeline of the four main stages of the development of the critical debate on Chinese modern calligraphy arranged by the author. The dates in the red circles are the pivotal moments for the development of the discussion.

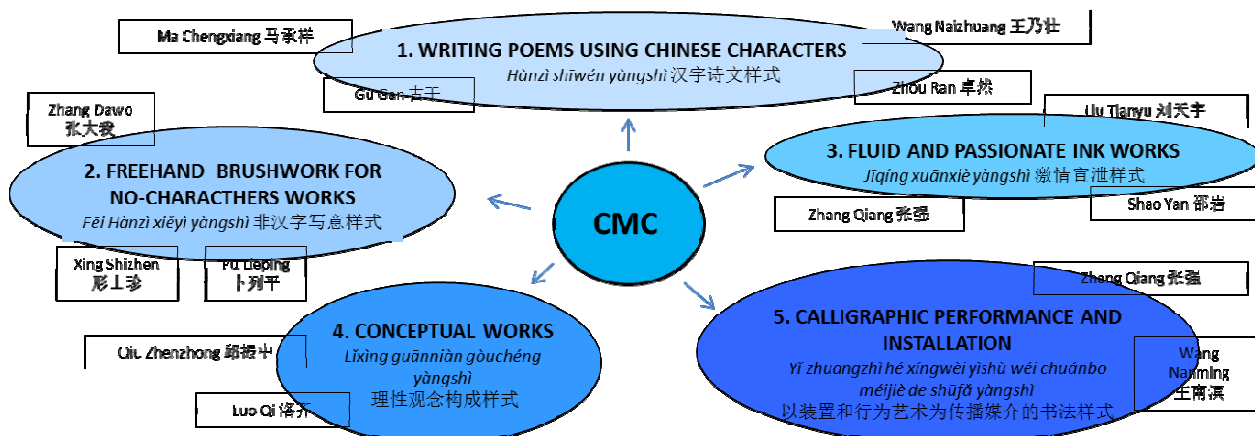


Figure 5. The classification of the Chinese modern calligraphy production into five typologies proposed by FU Qing-sheng and arranged by the author.

The other classifications emerged in this period focus only on extremely specific aspects. TAO Jun (1998), for example, only mentions the avant-garde movement, while ZHU Qing-sheng (2000) talks only about the artistic production of one artist in order to exemplify the major currents of the CMC. A common feature of all these classifications is the reference to a “traditional” calligraphic lexicon used to describe new forms of modern calligraphy.

(3) The third stage, from 2001 to 2006, is characterized by an “internalization” of the calligraphic lexicon used by Chinese scholars, in fact: (1) For the first time, Chinese art critics begin to speak about the interaction between calligraphy and contemporary art (LUO, 2001; YANG, 2001; ZHU, 2004); (2) the artists and the artworks analyzed increase and also foreigner artists begin to be named; (3) starting from the FU Qing-sheng classification, that represents the model in this period, two more typologies nearer to the global comprehension are added: These two typologies are “calligraphic abstraction” and “calligraphic collage”; (4) the word “anti-calligraphy” is replaced with the term “deconstruction of calligraphy”, more suitable for contemporary lexicon; (5) artists and artworks are not only named (as it was before) but sometimes also analyzed (SHEN, 2001; LUO, 2001, etc.); (6) the approach is more scientific and, even if the reference to calligraphy is still the core of the classifications, it is not the only one; (7) for the first time “calligraphy” begins to be considered only as a “resource” or the “starting point” of the creative process (SHEN, 2001; HONG, 2001; YANG, 2001; LANG, 2003; QIU, 2004).

(4) The fourth stage, from 2007 until now, which is characterized by three main approaches to arrange this complex matter, really represents a synthesis of the previous three stages: Classifications become part of the first four Ph.D. thesis written on this topic (the first one is by ZHANG Ai-guo in 2007; then LIU Zong-chao in 2008, LIU Can-ming in 2009, and WANG Tian-de in 2010). Even if the authors try to have a scientific approach to the question, and each of them adopts different perspectives, sometimes there is a problem regarding a lack of objectivity. LIU Zong-chao has a “traditional” approach: he focuses in particular on the transformations of “traditional” calligraphy and it refers quite almost only to Chinese academic circles. ZHANG Ai-guo focuses on the concept of *Hàn zì* “Chinese characters”: The first four categories of his classification refers to this keyword, while the other ones are arranged on the base of questionable criterions (just consider that the last one is created only to contain his own works). LIU Can-ming revises and reformulates ZHANG Ai-guo’s perspective, focusing on the manipulation of Chinese characters. Except for the

last proposal by WANG Tian-de, who uses the concept of “ink art” to propose new tendencies of CMC, we pass from an attempt to “internationalize” a “local” matter/lexicon in the previous period (2001-2006) to a reassertion of Chinese artistic lexicon by means of a traditional approach (see LIU Zong-chao), or using Chinese elements like *Hànzì* (see ZHANG Ai-guo and LIU Can-ming).

The author thinks that the difference among these approaches depends in particular on the “artistic identity” of the four scholars: The first one is a traditional calligrapher, the second and the third are modern calligraphers, and the fourth is an artist that sometimes uses calligraphy in his works.

The identity of the scholars is in fact one of the most important elements to understand the way they classified the artistic production of the so-called CMC. As you can see in the chart below (see Figure 6): (1) Most of the scholars interested in CMC are also calligraphers (12 out of 17), (2) most of them are calligraphers involved in the modern movement (8 out of 12); (3) and in their analysis all of them tend to point out the relevance of their artistic circle and include their own names and artworks in classification. The result is obviously a lack of objectivity; (4) then, just because in their being calligraphers they are still deeply rooted in traditional aesthetics, in their essays they continue to use a calligraphic lexicon, which is obviously comprehensible only inside their circles. It’s not a case that the only four scholars who try to propose new visions are “pure” art critics (LI Xian-ting and YANG Ying-shi) or calligraphers who are also painters, or better who are more painters than calligraphers (LUO Qi and WANG Tian-de); (5) all of them also belong to Chinese academic institutions, sponsored by the government, so, like the ancient literati in the Imperial China, they formed hermetically closed circles, difficult to understand outside China and so not open to a global comprehension.

ART CRITIC	CALLIGRAPHER	MODERN CALLIGRAPHER	INCLUSION IN CLASSIFICATION	CALLIGRAPHIC LEXICON	ACADEMIC
Zhu Qingsheng	YES	X	X	YES	X
Shen Wei	YES	X	X	YES	X
Luo Qi	YES	X	X	NO (“calligraphism”)	X
Qiu Zhenzhong	YES	X	X	YES	X
Zhang Aiguo	YES	X	X	YES (<i>Hanzi</i>)	X
Liu Canming	YES	X	X	YES (<i>Hanzi</i>)	X
Wang Tiande	YES	X	X	NO (ink painting)	X
Chen Dazhong	YES	X		NO	X
Hong Huizhen	YES			NO (“-ism”)	X
Tao Jun	YES			YES (<i>Hanzi</i>)	X
Lang Shaojun	YES			YES	X
Liu Zongchao	YES			YES (tradition VS modernity)	X
Zhang Yiguo	NO			YES (tradition VS modernity)	X
Gao Tianmin	NO			YES	X
Fu Jingsheng	NO			YES	X
Yang Yingshi	NO			NO	X
LI Xianting	NO			NO (calligraphy VS painting)	

Figure 6. Table of the main Chinese art critics interested in Chinese modern calligraphy arranged by the author. This table shows if these art critics are also calligraphers (second column), modern calligrapher (third column), academic (sixth column), if they include their own names in classifications (forth column), and which kind of artistic lexicon they used in their classifications (fifth column).

The inadequacy and limits of this kind of perspective, especially for an international audience, is so evident. It is just starting from this assumption and after analyzing more than 200 artists involved in the calligraphic modern movement, that the author finally proposes a new classification of the so-called CMC: Two are the main currents (Barrass, 2002): the modernists and the avant-garde. The first one focuses on stylistic exploration of calligraphic art, and it is characterized by three different tendencies: (1) pictorial-pictographic tendency; (2) toward abstraction and new spatial compositions; and (3) calligraphic collage. The second one aims at a radical and total transformation of calligraphic art: The Chinese characters are no longer recognizable because of the “deconstruction of calligraphy” (conceptual current) or because the focus is on the abstract beauty of calligraphic line (abstract currents) or instead because the medium has been changed (from the “four treasure of the study” to performance, dance, multimedia art, and graffiti art).⁷

Conclusion

As it has been illustrated in this article, the critical debate on modern calligraphy in contemporary China focuses on three main questions: (1) definition of the phenomenon; (2) analysis of its nature; and (3) classification of the artistic production. From the end of the nineties, Chinese art critics try to solve these debated questions suggesting most of different names, categorizations, and codifications, but none of them seems to provide a joint and unanimous solution. According to the author, the only thing to do is not to give a fixed label to a changeable phenomenon like that of the so-called “CMC” (as most of the Chinese scholars have done), but to focus on the concept of “modernity” in Chinese calligraphy. Then, just because of its Janus nature, we do not have to think of it as a unitary phenomenon, but we have to distinguish two different faces of the same phenomenon: WANG Dong-ling’s and WANG Nan-ming’s perspectives. Finally, considering the inadequacy and “scientific” limits of the Chinese attempts to classify the artistic production, we have to think of a new proper classification, which must be comprehensible also outside China, and suitable for a global contest. All of this in order to give a general, comprehensive view of the present theoretical discussion on a complex and multifaceted phenomenon is considered the calligraphy metamorphosis in China nowadays.

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⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the Avant-garde currents, see Iezzi, A. (2013), “Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy between tradition and innovation” (pp. 167-176).

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