

# Site-specific Performances of Chinese Calligraphy at Historic Buildings of Hong Kong\*

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## Abstract

This paper presents the wider significance of Chinese calligraphy with elements of public display of Chinese language and linguistic landscape (LL) in the innovative context of site-specific performances of calligraphy at historic buildings of Hong Kong. In sharp contrast with the conventional approach of producing and appreciating calligraphic works in relatively quiet interior settings such as studios and museums, the large-scale site-specific performances of calligraphy under examination were conducted at public venues in a more dynamic manner with emphases on not only the final creative outputs, but also the processes of the entire performances of calligraphy. With an integrated research methodology that encompasses interdisciplinary methods in art history, creative arts and linguistic landscape, this paper endeavors to understand the motives and uses of Chinese language in the artistic form of calligraphy performance as they were displayed in public spaces. Findings showed that public performances of Chinese calligraphy as composites of aesthetic-object-cum-public-message were effectively used as lively vehicles for creating not only public messages pertaining to the functions, missions and visions of historic buildings in Hong Kong, but also the broader socio-cultural meanings of the historical and cultural heritage as well as the revitalization of historic buildings within the context of the history and development of the modern city of Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** Chinese calligraphy; Chinese art history; creative arts; site-specific performance; linguistic landscape (LL)

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## 1. Introduction

Chinese calligraphy is a fascinating form of art embedded with Chinese characters that fundamentally carry literary meanings. The sublime brushstrokes and their aesthetically pleasing configurations, created with ink and *maobi* (a pointed writing brush), are fabulous in their power to create dynamics of gestural motion. When this artistic expression is transformed into a new form of public display in the city, new energy simultaneously radiates from the cityscape. This paper examines the wider significance of Chinese calligraphy in the innovative context of large-scale site-specific performances of calligraphy at historic buildings in the city of Hong Kong.

### 1.1 Conventional Approach to Chinese Calligraphy

With the exclusive use of writing brushes in the creative process of art making, Chinese calligraphy has long been associated with China's educated elite (Knight, 2012, pp.18-20). In this light, traditional parameters of research on Chinese calligraphy have revolved around its practices and developments in the social and cultural contexts of scholarly life and values as well as literati culture. As a subject of academic inquiry, Chinese calligraphy is commonly studied in the field of art history in contemporary academia. Traditional approaches have focused on the intrinsic conventions of Chinese calligraphy such as calligraphic aesthetics and stylistic developments. A perfect example is a book chapter titled "Chinese Calligraphy: Theory and History" (Fong, W., 1999), in which the author examines the development of Chinese calligraphy through ages in terms of aesthetics, calligraphic style, scholar-official calligraphers, and literati philosophy and culture.

### 1.2 Site-specific Performances of Chinese Calligraphy at Historic Buildings of Hong Kong

The abovementioned conventional approach to Chinese calligraphy is a powerful method to understand the close relationship between the development of calligraphy in traditional China and the literati circles of various periods in history. However, this approach is not adopted in the present study because it cannot effectively elucidate how calligraphy works exist beyond the realm of literati and appear in public venues, the process of which passes on broader cultural meanings and values to the wider community and society.

In sharp contrast with the conventional practice of producing and appreciating calligraphic works in relatively quiet interior settings such as artists' studios, *yaji* (literary gatherings or "elegant" gatherings), or even museums and galleries in the present day, the large-scale site-specific performances of calligraphy under examination were conducted at public venues in a more dynamic manner with emphases on not only the final creative outputs, but also the processes of the entire performances of calligraphy.

### 1.3 Methodology

The broader social and cultural implications of site-specific performances at historic buildings as public spaces can be interpreted through the critical lens used in the field of linguistic landscape, as it "attempts to understand the motives, uses, ideologies, language varieties and contestations of multiple forms of 'languages' as they are displayed in public spaces." ("Aims and Scopes", 2015)

Through the development of an integrated research methodology that encompasses interdisciplinary approaches in art history, creative arts and linguistic landscape, this paper seeks to investigate the motives and uses of Chinese language in the artistic form of calligraphy performance as they were conducted, displayed and appreciated in public spaces. Through an in-depth examination of the intrinsic elements of calligraphy—including literary contents, calligraphic aesthetics and styles as well as the extrinsic conditions of the historical and socio-cultural contexts of the historic buildings concerned, this research endeavors to decipher the broader socio-cultural meanings of site-specific performances of Chinese calligraphy at historic buildings of Hong Kong.



## 2. Ink Dance at Historic Relics: Ex-Royal Air Force Station (Kai Tak)

The Ex-Royal Air Force (RAF) Station (Kai Tak) (1933-1978) is located at 51 Kwun Tong Road in Kowloon East in the proximity of Kai Tak Airport, which was the international airport of Hong Kong from 1925 until 1998. The RAF Station comprises two main buildings:

- 1.) Officers' Quarters Compound RAF with Officers' Mess, and
- 2.) Officers' Quarters Compound Annex Block No. 2

The architectural complex has been assessed by the government as a Grade I historic building of Hong Kong (Home and Youth Affairs Bureau [HYAB], n.d.; Antiquities Advisory Board [AAB], 2018).

Built in the Colonial Neoclassical style of architecture (AAB, n.d.), the fabulous historic site is filled with striking aesthetics and values in the history of architecture and development of the city of Hong Kong. In this light, the historical relic testifies to the presence of the British Royal Air Force as part of the history of Hong Kong. The historic site was renovated as the Kai Tak campus of Hong Kong Baptist University that housed its Academy of Visual Arts (AVA) in 2005. Launching the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in Visual Arts Degree Programme in the academic year 2005-06, AVA and her faculty members started to develop and implement a completely new university-level visual arts curriculum in Hong Kong that nurtured students on the Kai Tak Campus. Occupying an area of 3,500 square meters, the two main architectural structures were equipped with facilities for studios of drawing, painting, printmaking, ceramics, sculpture, installation, a metal foundry, an exhibition gallery and art student studio spaces (AVA, n.d.).

In 2009 Hong Kong Baptist University received an award to recognize her effort to revitalize the historic site. This conservation project of adaptive reuse of the Ex-Royal Air Force Station (Kai Tak) as the Academy of Visual Arts (AVA) was named an Honorable mention in UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation (Hong Kong Heritage, 2022; Michelle the Heriporter, 2013).

To draw the general public's attention to the revitalized historic monument and its profound educational impact, Daniel Chak Kwong Lau conducted a site-specific performance of Chinese calligraphy there in 2012, titled "Ink Dance at Historic Relics: Chinese Calligraphy Performance Conducted at Ex-Royal Air Force Station, a Grade One Historic Building of Hong Kong" (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Daniel Chak Kwong Lau, Ink Dance at Historic Relics: Chinese Calligraphy Performance Conducted at Ex-Royal Air Force Station, a Grade One Historic Building of Hong Kong



Source: Lau, C. (2013) Ink Dance at Historic Relics. Retrieved from HKBU Heritage: <https://heritage.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/routes/view/scripts/en/owners/Faculty/ids/HER-010786>

Rendered in a huge scale in *bangshu*, or oversized-character script, the literary content of the calligraphic work was composed by the calligrapher himself as an Eight-Character-Line Couplet:

From the Royal Air Force, a historic relic was revitalized;  
To nurture modern talents at the Academy of Visual Arts,  
Hong Kong Baptist University.  
皇家空軍活化古蹟  
浸大視藝薰陶今才

(English translation by the author with the assistance of Dr. Vaughan King Tong Mak)

The huge Chinese characters and the work on monumental scale is a metaphor for the significance of the revitalization of the historical site and its profound impact on education (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Daniel Chak Kwong Lau, Ink Dance at Historic Relics: Chinese Calligraphy Performance Conducted at Ex-Royal Air Force Station, a Grade One Historic Building of Hong Kong



Source: Lau, C. (2013) Ink Dance at Historic Relics. Retrieved from HKBU Heritage: <https://heritage.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/routes/view/scripts/en/owners/Faculty/ids/HER-010786>

During the performance, the performer created a delightful ambience in his interaction with the responsive audience on aspects of conservation and revitalization of historic buildings in Hong Kong. "The huge couplets, hung on the façade of the two-storey building with colonnaded verandahs, creates an innovative fusion of the Colonial Neoclassical style of architecture and the traditional Chinese aesthetics of honesty and austerity in calligraphy." (Lau, 2013)

In 2022, Lau conducted another Chinese calligraphy performance at the same historic monument (view video online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eIidr0z1aI>). The event was organized by Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), a Hong Kong-based television broadcasting company, for the shooting of the company's art and cultural TV program title "Art and Culture Magazine," (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-ur10Btq2I>). Expressed as the large-scale site-specific calligraphy performance of a seven-character-line couplet in *bangshu* (oversized-character script) on the spot, Lau's poetic lines delineate how the natural environment that surrounds the historical monument became the fountainhead of his artistic endeavor (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Daniel Chak Kwong Lau, Ink Dance at Historic Relics: seven-character-line couplet in bangshu (oversized-character script)**



Source: Photography by Albert Tsoi. Image supplied by and with permission of Albert Tsoi

The nature-imagery-filled inspiration eventually translated into quick wit in his poetry writing and spontaneity in the powerful yet fluid brushwork of his calligraphy (view online video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eIidr0z1aI>):

Like a spell the birds' chirpy tunes linger,  
As my inspiration comes in bursts.  
The trees dance and sway into life,  
In their shimmering lights my inkscape emerges.

禽聲婉轉靈機動  
樹影婆娑墨象生

(English translation by Dr. Vaughan King Tong Mak)

Culminating in the synergy of the fabulous historic building, the literary content of the poetic lines, the forceful calligraphic brushstrokes, and the aesthetics of the performer's body movements, this site-specific performance of calligraphy vividly reflects how rustic ambience of the building is conducive to the efficacious use of the revitalized historic building as a new venue to nurture creativity (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Daniel Chak Kwong Lau, Ink Dance at Historic Relics: The forceful calligraphic brushstrokes, and the aesthetics of the performer's body movements**



Source: Photography by Albert Tsoi. Image supplied by and with permission of Albert Tsoi

In a nutshell, this series of public performances of Chinese calligraphy perceptibly bespeaks the benefit of successful adaptive reuse of the Ex-Royal Air Force Station (Kai Tak) for the long-term development of art education at university level in Hong Kong.

### 3. The Wonderful Cross: Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre

Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre is located on the hilltop of Tao Fong Shan, Sha Tin, in Hong Kong. It was founded as a Christian monastery in 1930 by the Norwegian missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952) who belonged to a Scandinavian mission called Christian Mission to Buddhists. The center's architectural complex was purposefully designed in a style that bears a striking resemblance to that of a Buddhist monastery by the Danish architect, Johannes Prip-Møller, who had earnestly studied Buddhist architecture in mainland China (Lau, 2019, pp. 963). The center has been classified as a Grade II historic building of Hong Kong by the government of Hong Kong (HYAB, n.d.; AAB, 2018).

The incorporation of conspicuous elements of traditional Chinese architecture into the design of the Christian monastery witnessed the Norwegian missionary's inclusive approach of developing contextual Christian spirituality in the Chinese community in Hong Kong. In a similar vein, many beautiful works of Chinese calligraphy in the forms of wooden tablets and couplets have been purposefully displayed all over the Christian monastery as integral parts of the traditional Chinese architecture to convey major doctrines of Christianity and core values in Christian faith. (Lau, 2019). As Chinese calligraphy has long been venerated as one of the most important aspects of Chinese art and culture, the ubiquitous calligraphic works embedded within the architectural complex are effective in creating a culturally inclusive and non-threatening environment for the Chinese people in Hong Kong to know more about Christianity introduced by the Western missionaries.

To draw the general public's attention to the unique socio-cultural and religious phenomenon at the historic Christian monastery where Chinese calligraphy has played a pivotal role in enhancing the development of contextual Christian spirituality, Daniel Chak Kwong Lau conducted a site-specific performance of Chinese calligraphy in March of 2023 at this historic monument (view online video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of0jg\\_DJvZQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of0jg_DJvZQ)). The large-scale public performance of calligraphy was conducted in conjunction with the shooting of a TV program produced by Showers of Blessing Evangelistic Ministry (<https://youtu.be/OyxCixBDofA?feature=shared>). Entitled "The Wonderful Cross", the performance was conducted right under the gigantic cross (height: 12 meters) on the eastern side of the architectural complex on the hilltop (Figure 5).





Figure 5: The Wonderful Cross — Site-specific Calligraphy Performance (Historical Buildings Series: Tao Fong Shan) / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy / Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre (Grade II historic building of Hong Kong) / 2023

As an eye-catching sign of the center, the gigantic cross is often an attraction for Christians to come for prayer or meditation, and even for hikers and excursionists to stop by to enjoy the surrounding scenic view of distant hills and buildings in the suburban area of Shatin in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Lau's calligraphy performance conducted under the cross bespeaks not only the colossal cross as the most significant sign of the Christian monastery, but also the artist's most distinctive artistic interpretation of his own experience at the Christian monastery, as revealed in his self-composed poem:

On a serene hill far away,  
I was enlightened by the Way.  
In the light-filled grove,  
the wind freely blows.  
Oh, how wonderful is the cross!  
For His Amazing Love is my life source!  
(Lau, 2023)

Filled with a rich and subtle lyricism, the nature imagery of "light-filled grove" and "wind freely blows" subtly intermingles with the spiritual metaphors of light for God, and of the wind (*fong* or *feng* in pinyin) for the power of the Holy Spirit, and of the Way (*tao*) for God or "the Word" (Lau, 2023). In the Gospel of John, God and His "Word" are interchangeable. ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1:1 [New International Version]).

The Chinese character *tao* literally means way. With deeper cultural and philosophical meanings associated with the Daoist concepts of naturalness and natural order of things and the universe, *tao* has the extended meaning of the Way. In this light, the character *tao*, or the Way, adopted as the first Chinese character of the name of Tao Fong Shan Christian Center well reflects the Christian monastery

founder's promotion of the inclusive dialogue between philosophies, religions and cultures. In a similar vein, Lau used *tao* and *fong* (*feng*) as the first characters of the first two lines in his self-composed poem to embrace this inclusive spirit of dialogue (Lau, 2023). Highlighting the Christian center's name with the two characters *tao* and *fong* and their pertinent Christian doctrines that are interwoven with concepts in Chinese philosophy and culture, the first two lines of the performer's poem are magnified by the last two lines' portrayal of the colossal cross as the emblem of Jesus Christ's sacrificial love (Lau, 2023).

Immediately after rendering the twenty huge characters on the spot, the performer shared with the audience how he developed ideas in this performance. He explained that the immense love embodied in Jesus Christ's martyrdom is visually interpreted through the compelling configuration of twenty huge Chinese characters on four canvases radiating from the colossal cross. "Rendered in clerical script (*lishu*) with archaic and austere aesthetics, the calligraphic work's rough and unadorned brushwork and untrammelled style echo the rustic natural environment, the spontaneity of body movements and the improvisational gestural forces emanated from the artist's wielding of the giant brush" (Lau, 2023) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Daniel Chak Kwong Lau, *The Wonderful Cross: the spontaneity of body movements and the improvisational gestural forces*



Source: Photography by Albert Tsoi. Image supplied by and with permission of Albert Tsoi

Through both the artistic form of a lively calligraphy performance executed with great physical strength and passion, as well as the literary form of the four poetic lines that reveal the historic building's inclusive mission and the major religious doctrine of Jesus Christ's love, this calligraphy performance incarnates the Christian monastery's vision of developing contextual Christian spirituality through the performer's contemporary artistic expression in public space.



## 4. Conclusion

The site-specific performances of Chinese calligraphy conducted at the 2 historic buildings of Hong Kong under examination are perfect demonstrations of how richer and deeper historical, social and cultural meanings of historic buildings can be communicated through artistic activities, public display of Chinese language in the innovative form of Chinese calligraphy performance. While the Chinese calligraphy performances at Ex-Royal Air Force Station (Kai Tak) have addressed the benefits of heritage conservation and revitalization of Hong Kong's historic monuments, the one at Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre accentuates how the historic monument has been promoting the Christian doctrine of love and the spirit of inclusiveness as social ideals amid the encounter of Western and local people and culture in the context of religious dialogues and exchanges. Moreover, these Chinese calligraphy performances have drawn the general public's attention to how these historic buildings pertain to important aspects of the history and social history of Hong Kong inhabited with local and foreign residents who introduced new ideas and religion, Western culture and architecture.

As the social value of the historic monuments lies in the use and adaptive use by people in the past and the present, the abovementioned site-specific performances of Chinese calligraphy are striking artistic interpretations of how these historic buildings have been used to benefit the community in an extraordinary manner.

Scholars of linguistic landscape (LL) assert that the meaning of public texts can only be fully perceived by interpreting language as it is “materially placed in the world.” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. *i*). This specific method of language analysis sheds light on the present study of salient texts placed in public spaces in Hong Kong. As distinct forms of public texts, the abovementioned site-specific performances of Chinese calligraphy were conducted and communicated as integrated forms of artistic and literary languages as they were “materially placed in the world” during the site-specific performances at historic buildings. Through this unique perspective, the motives, meanings and social implications of these calligraphy performances can be more thoroughly deciphered.

In a nutshell, public performances of Chinese calligraphy as composites of aesthetic-object-cum-public-message were effectively used as lively vehicles for creating not only public messages pertaining to the functions, missions, visions and the benefits of historic buildings in Hong Kong, but also the broader socio-cultural meanings of the historical and cultural heritage as well as the revitalization of historic buildings within the context of the history and development of the modern city of Hong Kong.

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