

Redefining Tradition: Chak-kwong Daniel Lau and the Development of Calligraphy in Contemporary Hong Kong Art

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1. Introduction: Daniel Lau's Calligraphy: A Paradigm of Contemporary Hong Kong Art

The millennia-old tradition of Chinese calligraphy has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, particularly within Hong Kong's diverse cultural landscape. At the forefront of this evolution stands Daniel Lau, whose distinctive approach challenges conventional boundaries and reimagines the art form for the 21st century. This article examines Lau's contributions to contemporary calligraphy, positioning his work within the broader context of Hong Kong's art scene and in relation to other artists who incorporate calligraphy elements in their art practice.

Lau's oeuvre exemplifies the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation that characterizes much of contemporary Chinese art. By reconceptualizing calligraphy as a performative, audience-engaging, and multimodal practice, Lau has opened new avenues for engagement with this ancient art form. His approach not only preserves the technical prowess and cultural knowledge embedded in traditional calligraphy but also creates fresh opportunities for artistic expression and cultural dialogue in an increasingly globalized world.

The significance of Lau's work extends beyond the realm of calligraphy, touching on broader issues of cultural identity, artistic experimentation, and the role of traditional art forms in contemporary society. This study will explore how Lau expands the boundaries of calligraphy through innovations in form, medium, scale, and audience engagement, and discuss the development of traditional art forms in the context of contemporary global culture.

2. Continuity of Tradition: *In-Situ* Study of Epigraphic Calligraphy

Daniel Lau's artistic practice balances historical techniques with contemporary displays and interpretation, representing a significant development in the field of calligraphy. His methodology, centered on visiting historical sites with engraved calligraphy, connects to a long-standing tradition in Chinese calligraphy scholarship. This approach not only preserves traditional knowledge but also demonstrates how historical practices can remain relevant in a contemporary context.

Lau's work is influenced by his research on Qing dynasty figures such as Zheng Fu 鄭籟 (1622-1693) and Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), reflecting Kang's emphasis on innovation within tradition. By directly engaging with ancient inscriptions in their original settings, Lau gains insights that inform his contemporary interpretations, creating a dialogue between past and present that is both respectful of tradition and innovative in its execution.

The method of *in-situ* study, exemplified by Qing scholars promoting stele-school calligraphy, involves observation of epigraphic calligraphy in its original context. Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648-1718), a prominent Qing dynasty dramatist and poet, vividly captured this practice in his "Ode to Clerical Script by Zheng Fu"《鄭穀口隸書歌》:

The Han dynasty stele stands alone in the valley; the old man crosses the river to search for the existence of the stele. At the stele pavilion, he sleeps through the freezing rain, extracting the essence of the calligraphy cut on the stele and sighing deeply.

漢碑結僻谷口翁，渡江搜訪辯真實。碑亭凍雨取枕眠，扶神剔髓歎唧唧。

Following this tradition, Lau engages in the study of Han stelae *in-situ*, exploring heritage sites or places with rich history, such as the Confucius Temple in Qufu and the Stone Sutra Valley on Mount Tai. These visits provide insights into cultural context, monumental scale, and weathering effects on ancient inscriptions. This practice of direct observation facilitates an understanding of engraved calligraphy forms that surpasses insights from calligraphy copies or museum displays. Through this engagement, Lau internalizes the "bronze-and-stone flavor" sought by stele-school practitioners, deepening his comprehension of calligraphy's physical attributes and environmental interactions.

The integration of historical calligraphy script-style with contemporary artistic innovations is evident in Lau's performance *May Fourth Movement: Chinese Calligraphy Performance*《五四運動一百週年紀念巨幅書法現場表演（歷史建築系列·孫中山紀念館）》(Figure 1). Drawing inspiration from the "Diamond Sutra in Mount Tai's Stone Sutra Valley"《泰山經石峪》and Kang Youwei's theories on large-character calligraphy, this work balances flexibility and robustness in its brushwork. The final stroke of some characters especially at the end of each vertical scroll draws

from ancient calligraphy, specifically the elongated vertical elements found in the "Eulogy on Shimen"《石門頌》and Han dynasty bamboo slips.

Lau's approach highlights the importance of embodied knowledge in calligraphy. His *in-situ* studies emphasize the physical and contextual aspects of calligraphy creation, aspects often overlooked in more research or studio-based approaches by contemporary calligraphers or artists. This holistic understanding of calligraphy as both a visual art and a physical practice offers new perspectives on how traditional art forms can be studied, practiced, and innovated upon in the 21st century.



Figure 1: Large-scale Chinese Calligraphy Life Performance in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the May Fourth Movement / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy (with the element of interaction between the artist and audience) / Courtyard of Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum (Declared monument & Grade I historic building of Hong Kong) / 4 May 2019

3. Calligraphy Performance and Site-Specific Installations

The fusion of calligraphy and performance art marks a significant evolution in Hong Kong's contemporary calligraphy practice. Eminent art historian Professor Harold Mok notes that calligraphy performances have historically been rare, given the intrinsically private and scholarly nature of traditional calligraphy. However, he highlights a notable exception from pre-war Hong Kong: Du Qizhang 杜其章 (1897-1942). In the 1930s, Du captivated audiences with his innovative "ground-rolling" technique for cursive script calligraphy. This unique approach, characterized by Du's dynamic, serpentine movements, transformed the usually solitary act of calligraphy into a mesmerizing public spectacle, setting a precedent for the performative potential of this ancient art form.

While artists demonstrating writing or painting in front of audiences often occurred in classrooms as a form of teaching method, Ting Yin Yung (1902-1978) stood out in this regard. As an influential art educator and impactful modern artist, Ting frequently performed his art creation, more often painting and sometimes writing calligraphy, in public settings. What distinguished Ting from his contemporaries was not merely the instructional aspect of his demonstrations, but the performative nature of his creative process. Audiences were captivated by Ting's exceptional painting and calligraphy skills, marveling at both the speed and quality of his execution. These demonstrations transcended mere educational purposes, evolving into performances where the act of creation became as integral to the artwork as the final product itself. Ting's approach highlighted the dynamic, embodied nature of calligraphy and painting, emphasizing the performance element as a core component of the resulting work. This fusion of demonstration and performance laid important groundwork for later developments in calligraphy performance art.



Figure 2: *Tapping the Metropolis Rhythm: Whole-Body Rendition of the Calligraphic Brush* / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy (with elements of social media and live interaction between the artist and audience) / Curated and organised by Hong Kong Museum of Art / Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade, Hong Kong/ 2016

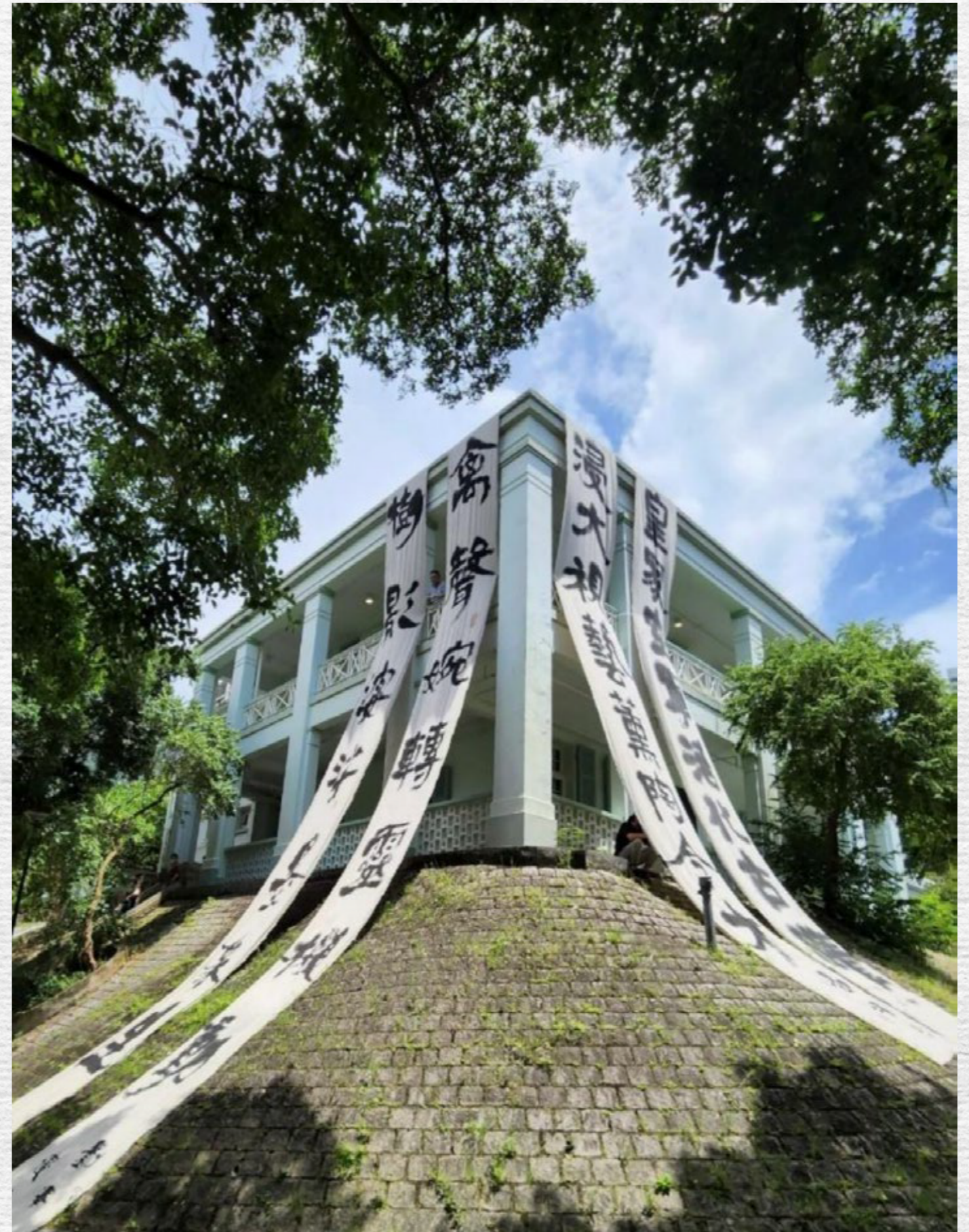


Figure 3: *Ink Dance at Historic Relics Series: Former Royal Air Force Station (1933-1978) (Historic Building Series: Kai Tak)* / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy/ 2022



Figure 4: *Wings of the Dawn* / Site-specific Performance of Chinese Calligraphy / Shek O Headland, Hong Kong / 2016

In contrast, Lau's calligraphy performance has developed further, embodying a harmonious synthesis of traditional mastery of brush using whole-body movement, and modern medium and display methods. *Tapping the Metropolis Rhythm: Whole-body Rendition of the Calligraphic Brush* 《都市變奏·身舞翰墨》香港科學館低層廣場 (Figure 2) illustrates the fusion of performance and calligraphy which challenges traditional notions of calligraphy as a solitary, contemplative practice and transforms it into a dynamic, public spectacle.

These large-scale calligraphy performances redefine the relationship between the artist's body and the act of writing. In these performances, Lau's entire body becomes an extension of the brush, creating monumental Chinese characters that fill entire walls or floors. The physicality of these performances not only emphasizes the embodied nature of calligraphy but also transforms the act of writing into a form of dance or martial art.

The scale of Lau's performative works is particularly noteworthy. By creating calligraphy forms or Chinese characters that dwarf the human body, Lau invites viewers to engage with calligraphy writing in a fundamentally new way. The monumental scale of these works challenges the viewer's perception of calligraphy as an intimate, small-scale art form, instead presenting it as a grand and immersive experience.

Site-specific calligraphy installations represent another novel approach to calligraphy in contemporary Hong Kong art. They engage directly with their

physical and cultural environments, creating new dialogues between tradition and modernity, art and space. Lau's *Ink Dance at Historic Relics*, performed at a former Royal Air Force Officers' mess 《古跡墨舞系列 場域特定書法表演 (歷史建築系列·前皇家空軍基地[啟德])》(Figure 3), exemplifies this trend. By situating his calligraphy performance in a site laden with long history, Lau creates a powerful commentary on Hong Kong's past and present, using the language of traditional art to speak to contemporary concerns.

Another significant example is *Wings of the Dawn* 《展開清晨的翅膀》(Figure 4), created in 2016 at Shek O incorporated natural elements like dawn, breeze, tides, and rocks, providing context for the biblical verses and symbolizing the artist's pursuit of harmony with God's creation.

This work comprises individual characters written on separate square canvases, arranged freely on the shore. This approach transforms calligraphy into environmental art, integrating the natural landscape into the artistic expression. Aerial photography and drones were used to capture the performance, visually representing the "wings" mentioned in the psalm and offering a unique perspective of the artwork in its coastal setting.

Another example *The Wonderful Cross — Site-specific Calligraphy Performance (Historical Buildings Series: Tao Fong Shan)* 《奇妙十架 —— 場域特定書法表演(歷史建築系列·道風山)》(Figure 5) was conducted at Tao Fong Shan Christian Center in Hong Kong, a site chosen for its spiritual significance and architectural features that blend Chinese and Christian elements. The performance was inspired by Lau's previous research on the role of calligraphy in expressing the center's mission and vision. The site-specific nature of the performance allowed for a unique interaction between the calligraphy, the natural environment, and the architectural elements, particularly the 12-meter cross that serves as a focal point of the complex. Lau created a poem that interweaves nature imagery with spiritual metaphors, using Chinese characters that reflect both Taoist concepts and Christian doctrines. This performance culminated in a large-scale calligraphy consisting of twenty characters spread across four canvases, radiating from the cross. Lau's use of clerical script and vigorous brushwork echoed the rustic surroundings and conveyed the power of divine love, while the physical act of creating the calligraphy became a form of meditation and spiritual expression.

These calligraphy performances demonstrate how site-specific calligraphy can engage with religious themes, natural settings, and architectural spaces to create a multifaceted artistic and spiritual experience. These site-specific works challenge traditional notions of calligraphy as an art form bound to specific materials (ink, paper, stone) and scales. By creating calligraphy installations that respond to and interact with architectural spaces or natural environments, Lau expands the physical and conceptual boundaries of calligraphy, transforming it into a form of environmental art that engages deeply with its surroundings.

4. Calligraphic Sculptures and Three-Dimensional Works

Lau's calligraphic sculptures move beyond the conventional ink-on-paper or other traditional formats, representing a contemporary interpretation of the long-standing tradition of integrating calligraphy with three-dimensional forms.

His use of wood as a medium allows for a thoughtful interplay between nature and calligraphy. For example, the *Riptide Series* 《激潮系列》, especially series no. 3: *Tide* 《潮》 (Figure 6), under the theme 'Song of Nature' 自然頌, demonstrates this approach. The character "chao" 潮 (tide) is rendered in intaglio, following the wood's natural grain and texture. The sculpture's form, with three upward-thrusting extremities contrasting a downward-stretching element, creates a visual tension that captures the energy of tides. This piece demonstrates Lau's skill in harmonizing the physical properties of wood with calligraphic design, effectively translating the character's meaning into a visual and tactile experience. The dynamic composition of the character, with its sweeping strokes and balanced structure, is accentuated by the



Figure 6: *Riptide Series* 《激潮系列》, series no. 3: *Tide* 《潮》/ Small-seal Script & Clerical Script / Calligraphy Sculpture / Mango wood / 57×52×33cm

three-dimensional form, allowing viewers to experience the character from multiple angles and appreciate the interplay of light and shadow on the carved surface.

Through this multifaceted design, Lau effectively transforms a theological concept into a tangible, interactive experience, demonstrating how contemporary calligraphy can transcend traditional boundaries to create works that are simultaneously conceptual, spiritual, and deeply rooted in the natural world.

Another example of Lau's innovative approach is seen in *Awestruck* 《驚歎》 (Figure 7), where he inscribed seal-script characters for "jingtān" 驚歎 on an irregular-shaped tree branch. Here, Lau allows the wood's weathered texture to influence both the form and meaning of the work, exemplifying his ability to adapt traditional scripts to unconventional surfaces and creating a temporal dialogue between contemporary materials and ancient techniques.

By choosing wood as his medium, Lau also engages with contemporary environmental concerns, reminding viewers of our connection to the natural world. His sculptures fuse traditional calligraphy aesthetic with established sculptural practices and environmental consciousness, demonstrating how traditional art forms can evolve to remain relevant in the 21st century while maintaining their cultural roots.

Lau's exploration of calligraphy in three-dimensional form extends beyond wood to include other materials, as exemplified by his glass sculpture *A Deep and Tranquil Mountain* 《山深杳杳》 (Figure 8). This piece represents a significant departure from

traditional calligraphy mediums, using the transparency and malleability of glass to reimagine the Chinese character "shan" 山 (mountain) in a novel, sculptural form.

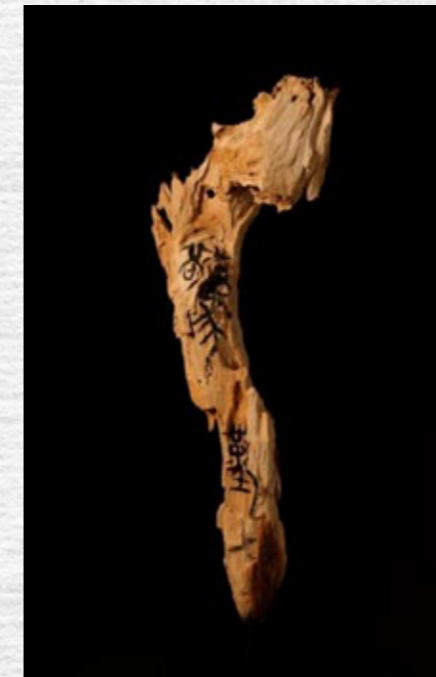


Figure 7: *Awestruck* / Small-seal Script / Calligraphy Sculpture / Ink on teak wood / 35 x 15 x 78 cm



Figure 8: *A Deep and Tranquil Mountain* / Cursive Script / Chinese character shan, or mountain / Calligraphy Sculpture / Glass / 10×17 15 cm

The use of glass as a medium for calligraphy is particularly innovative, as it allows Lau to explore the interplay between solidity and translucency, mirroring the duality often found in Chinese landscape paintings where mountains appear both substantial and diaphanous. The sculpture's undulating form, reminiscent of water waves, creates a visual paradox - a mountain rendered in a malleable, almost liquescent state. This juxtaposition of concepts (mountain/water, solid/pliable) adds layers of meaning to the work, inviting viewers to contemplate the transformative nature of perception and the mutability of seemingly fixed forms.

The transparency of the glass introduces a new dimension to calligraphy, allowing light to play a crucial role in the viewer's experience. As light passes through and reflects off the sculpture, it creates shifting patterns and shadows, evoking the changing atmospheres of misty mountain landscapes. This dynamic interaction with light and environment means that the sculpture's appearance is in constant flux, much like the varying interpretations and emotional responses elicited by traditional calligraphy.

By translating a two-dimensional character into a three-dimensional, transparent form, Lau challenges viewers to engage with calligraphy from multiple perspectives - literally and figuratively. The sculpture invites circumambulation, revealing different aspects of the character's form as one moves around it. This multi-faceted viewing experience echoes the way meaning in Chinese characters can shift and deepen with contemplation and context.

Lau's innovative approach expands the visual lexicon of calligraphy while bridging traditional Chinese art with contemporary sculptural practices. His work emphasizes the materiality and multimodality of calligraphy through the integration of diverse media, creating cross-disciplinary expressions that affirm the relevance and vitality of calligraphy in contemporary art contexts. Despite this modernization, Lau maintains a profound connection to the art form's cultural

roots. Through his work, Lau prompts viewers to reexamine enduring themes in Chinese art through a contemporary lens, fostering a dialogue between historical and current artistic practices. This approach not only challenges conventional perceptions of calligraphy but also positions it as a dynamic medium capable of addressing contemporary aesthetic and cultural concerns.

5. Expanding Boundaries: Scale, Space, and Audience Engagement in Contemporary Calligraphy

Lau's approach to Chinese calligraphy is characterized by experimentation with unconventional scales, distinguishing his practice from many contemporary Hong Kong calligraphers who adhere more strictly to traditional format and typical size of calligraphy. Lau's work challenges and expands the definition of calligraphy while maintaining connections to traditional script-styles.

Central to Lau's artistic strategy is the manipulation of scale, manifesting in both monumental and small-scale works. His large-scale pieces, often resulting from performance art, exemplify this approach. Key examples include *What is Mankind: We are but mayflies lodging between heaven and earth, single grains adrift, far out on the dark blue sea.*¹ 《人算甚麼：寄蜉蝣於天地渺滄海之一粟》(Figure 9) and the site-specific *Ink Dance at Historic Relics Series: Former Royal Air Force Base (Historic Building Series: Kai Tak)* 《古跡墨舞系列 場域特定書法表演 (歷史建築系列·前皇家空軍基地[啟德])》(Figure 10).

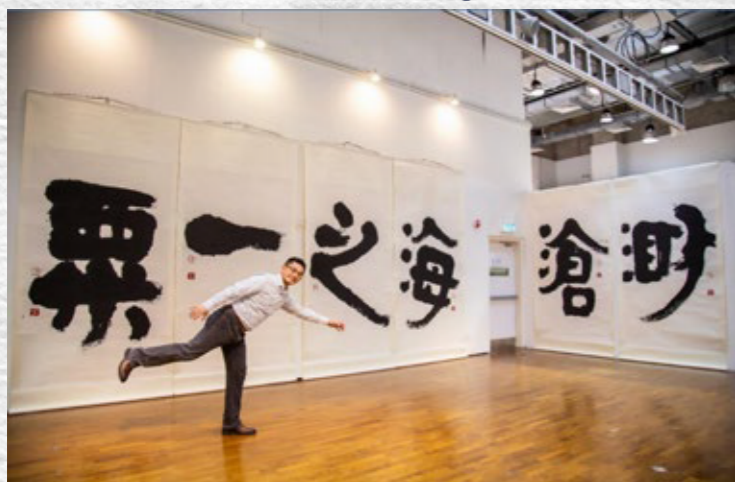


Figure 9: *What is Mankind: We are but mayflies lodging between heaven and earth, single grains adrift, far out on the dark blue sea* / Oversized-character Calligraphy / Standard Script / Ink on paper / hanging scrolls, 340 x 144 cm (each)

In these works, individual characters reach or exceed human height, with hanging scrolls sometimes extending to nearly twice the height of the surrounding architecture. This monumental scale not only challenges conventional notions of calligraphy practice but also creates a visual dialogue between the art form and its architectural context.

Simultaneously, Lau explores the realm of the minute, creating diminutive postscripts or inscriptions, as seen in *Tiny Dust* 《微塵》(Figure 11). The juxtaposition of scales within



Figure 10: *Ink Dance at Historic Relics Series: Former Royal Air Force Station (1933-1978) (Historic Building Series: Kai Tak)* / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy/ 2022

a single work compels viewers to engage from multiple perspectives, alternating between distant appreciation and intimate scrutiny. Through this experiment, Lau blurs the boundaries between monumental public art and privately contemplated fine artworks, inviting a reconsideration of the parameters of calligraphy expression.

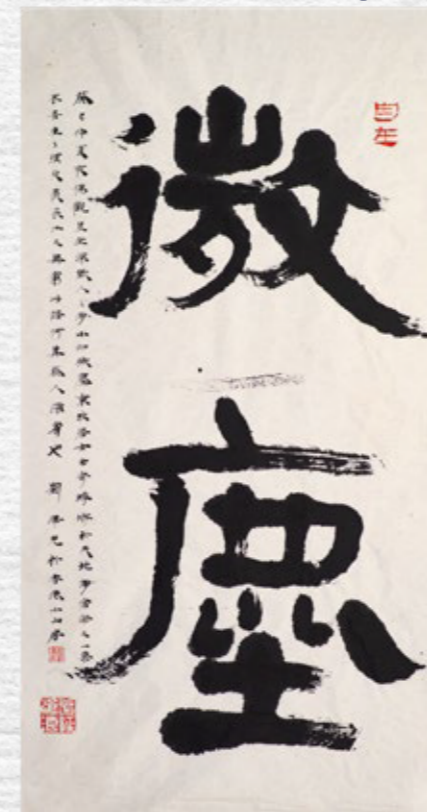


Figure 11: *Tiny Dust* / Oversized-character Calligraphy / Standard Script / Small-standard Script / Ink on paper / hanging scroll / 248 x 129 cm



Figure 12: *Delight through the Eye and Childlike Heart: Chinese Calligraphy-Performance Art / Oversized-character Calligraphy (650×310 cm) / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy (with the element of interaction between the artist and audience), Sha Tin Town Hall, Hong Kong / 2024*

From an analytical perspective, Lau's work can be understood as a contemporary reimagining of the calligraphy tradition, engaging with modern artistic concerns such as scale and the relationship between art and environment. His approach aligns with art historian Wu Hung's concept of "contemporaneity,"

which elucidates how contemporary Chinese artists navigate between their cultural heritage and the demands of the global art world.

As calligraphers push the boundaries of scale and spatial dynamics, they simultaneously invite viewers to become active participants in the creative process, blurring the lines between artist and audience. This evolution in Hong Kong's calligraphy scene marks a significant shift towards interactive and participatory elements, transforming the traditionally solitary practice into a communal experience. Such a transition reflects broader trends in contemporary art and prompts a reevaluation of calligraphy's ontological boundaries as an art form. Lau's work exemplifies this innovative approach, seamlessly integrating traditional calligraphy techniques with modern, participatory practices in contemporary Hong Kong.

Lau's interactive methodology is evident in performances such as *Delight through the Eye and Childlike Heart: Chinese Calligraphy-Performance Art* 《瞳趣童心——場域特定書法行為藝術》(Figure 12) which featured direct engagement with children.

He guided young participants' hands in the calligraphy writing process using oversized brushes on a large-scale canvas as part of the performance element.

This site-specific performance, conducted at the Sha Tin Town Hall, transcended traditional calligraphy boundaries by incorporating bodily movements, audience participation, and spontaneous interactions.

This performance aligns with contemporary art theories emphasizing participatory practices and relational aesthetics. In fact, Lau's participatory approach contrasts with the more solitary, contemplative practices of most traditional calligraphers. By challenging conventional notions of artistic creation and reception, his approach serves to democratize calligraphy, subverting its traditional conception as an individualistic and expertise-driven practice. This methodology not only revitalizes calligraphy but also demonstrates its potential as a medium for interactive and educational experiences.

Through the integration of participatory elements and contemporary art trends, Lau maintains the relevance and vitality of calligraphy in the contemporary art world. This transformation challenges traditional notions of calligraphy and opens new avenues for engagement and interpretation.

6. Conclusion: Calligraphy Reimagined: Lau's Legacy in Hong Kong Art

Daniel Lau's work exemplifies the ongoing redefinition of calligraphy within contemporary Hong Kong art. By reconceptualizing calligraphy as a performative, interactive, and multimodal practice, Lau has contributed significantly to the development of this traditional art form in a modern context. His approach extends the parameters of calligraphy in terms of scale, materiality, and audience engagement, challenging conventional definitions of the practice.

Throughout this study, we have examined various aspects of Lau's innovative approach:

1. His *in-situ* studies of epigraphic calligraphy, which connect his work to historical traditions while informing his contemporary interpretations.
2. His calligraphy performances and site-specific installations, which transform calligraphy into a dynamic, public spectacle and engage with architectural and natural environments.
3. His three-dimensional calligraphic sculptures in wood and glass, which expand the visual lexicon of calligraphy and bridge traditional Chinese art with contemporary sculptural practices.
4. His experimentation with scale, from monumental public works to minute inscriptions, which invites viewers to engage with calligraphy from multiple perspectives.
5. His incorporation of audience participation, which democratizes calligraphy and aligns with contemporary art theories of relational aesthetics.

Lau's work demonstrates how calligraphy can evolve beyond its traditional role as a form of writing to become a dynamic, embodied practice capable of engaging with contemporary issues while maintaining its cultural essence. The diverse approaches evident in his work illustrate the medium's adaptability in addressing contemporary themes, reflecting broader trends in Hong Kong's art scene where

practitioners negotiate the complex relationship between tradition and innovation, local identity and global influences.

Lau's practice raises critical questions about the preservation of tradition, reception within established calligraphy circles, and the integration of technologies and social media. These inquiries point to potential future trajectories for calligraphy in Hong Kong and beyond, suggesting ongoing opportunities for redefining this traditional art form in contemporary contexts.

In the broader context of Hong Kong's evolving cultural landscape, Lau's work serves as a case study in how traditional art forms can be redefined to maintain relevance and vitality. His approach to calligraphy contributes to scholarly discussions on cultural heritage, artistic innovation, and the role of traditional practices in shaping contemporary understandings of identity and culture in Hong Kong.

This examination of Lau's practice and its impact on the development of calligraphy in contemporary Hong Kong art underscores the dynamic nature of tradition. It demonstrates how artists can honor cultural heritage while simultaneously pushing boundaries, thereby ensuring the continued evolution and relevance of traditional art forms in the 21st century. As such, Daniel Lau's work not only redefines calligraphy but also offers a model for the broader reimagining of traditional arts in contemporary global contexts.

Endnote:

- ¹ Translation by Tian Xiaofei, cited from her book *The Halberd at Red Cliff Jian'an and the Three Kingdoms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), 306.