

Scholarship, Tradition and the Times: Lau Chak Kwong's World of Calligraphy

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Chinese calligraphy has an ancient origin; it is an energetic art that has been continuing and reinventing itself for thousands of years. Traditionally, calligraphy belonged to the world of literati. In assessing calligraphy, the literati places emphasis on methods, rules, virtuosity and aesthetics, as well as the utmost importance of erudition, moral character, talent, style, artistic lineage and versatility. In their eyes, calligraphy should embody deep learning and profound cultural significance. Today, however, we are living in a world of changing social structures and cultural environment. Therefore, calligraphers nowadays must face a head-on challenge in bridging traditional calligraphy with contemporary reality.

Lau Chak Kwong is a calligrapher and art historian. His dual identity and syncretic practice prove to be extraordinary in Hong Kong's art scene among calligraphers. Lau himself has previously articulated his own artistic principle and approach eloquently (in an article entitled "The Refreshing Paradox of Embracing Innovation for a Return to Antiquity"),¹ while in this essay I would like to make some supplementary remarks on Lau's art from three perspectives, namely: 1) scholarship, 2) tradition, and 3) the times.

Setting Off from Scholarship

In ancient times, scholarly interpretations of calligraphy history often dictated the prevalent calligraphic styles of individuals in the literati circles. Take the Qing dynasty as an example; with the rising popularity of evidential research (*kaojuxue*), literati all of a sudden became obsessed with epigraphy – what was then called "the study of metal and stone" (*jinshixue*). As a result, the Northern steles, while previously being neglected, suddenly gained traction. Most representatively, Ruan Yuan (1764-1849) put forward the idea of "Northern steles and Southern copybooks", advocating that calligraphers should model after Northern steles in executing calligraphy. His argument was later echoed by Bao Shichen (1775-1855), and Kang Youwei (1858-1927), with the latter expounding on this argument in his treatise *Guang Yizhou shuangji* (*Extended Paired Oars for the Boat of Art*). Consequently, many calligraphers followed suit in practising what was called the Stele School of Calligraphy, which championed certain qualities in calligraphy: unadornedness, austerity, masculinity, and sturdiness. This Qing-dynasty case illustrates perfectly the entangled relationship between scholarship

and calligraphy. In the past, calligraphers often exploited this synergy between calligraphic art and academic research, but most contemporary calligraphers no longer do that.

In his early academic training, Lau first wrote his dissertation on Kang Youwei's *Guang Yizhou shuangji* and earned his MPhil degree at The University of Hong Kong. Subsequently, he studied Ding Jing – one of the Eight Masters of Xiling – and obtained a PhD degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara. While pursuing his doctoral degree, Lau was responsible for writing 36 entries for the exhibition catalogue *Double Beauty: Qing Dynasty Couplets from the Lechangzai Xuan Collection*,² co-edited by Professor Peter Sturman, his thesis supervisor, and Professor Jason Kuo. As evidenced in Lau's early scholarship, he came to acquire deep knowledge and understanding of Qing calligraphy, especially epigraphical calligraphy. Later, he went on to demonstrate his expertise in Stele School calligraphy through a series of publications such as "The Clerical Script of the Eight Masters of Xiling," "Big-character Couplets by Kang Youwei," "On the Confucian Aesthetics and Ideas of Kang Youwei's Calligraphic Theory and Practice," and "How Steles of the Han Dynasty Inspired Zheng Fu."³ Out of all Qing calligraphers, Lau paid special attention to two masters, namely Zheng Fu (1622-1693) and Kang Youwei. Particularly, Lau admired Zheng Fu's efforts in reviving the clerical script by returning to Han steles, and he also appreciated Kang Youwei's promotion of steles and oversized-character couplets.

Lau's art-historical research has laid a solid foundation for his creative works. Through his scholarship on Qing calligraphy, for example, he acquired a deep understanding of how Qing scholars reconstructed the history of calligraphy, how they regarded the Han as more important than the Wei-Jin as the source of calligraphy, and how they eventually revived the Han clerical script in calligraphy practice. Inspired by this research, Lau uses the Han clerical script as a creative resource for his own art, and he did it in three particular ways. Firstly, he instils a sense of antiquity into his calligraphy by modelling after the famous steles and bamboo slips of the Han dynasty. Secondly, Lau follows the footsteps of the Qing literati by visiting famous stele sites. By touching and contemplating these ruinous sites, Lau managed to experience firsthand the sheer grandeur, as well as the rough yet natural beauty of *moya* inscriptions (cliff carving). Thirdly, Lau endeavoured to exhaust the possibility of what can be called the "spirit of metal and stone." He starts exploring such possibilities with Han clerical script, and then historically tracing the styles and patterns in earlier (such as the oracle-bone inscription of the Shang and Zhou dynasties) and later periods (such as steles and rubbings in the Northern and Southern Dynasties). In this sense, Lau's scholarly insights have been channelled into his creative works, eventually establishing his own calligraphic style.

In Lau's calligraphic works, one can often detect traces of his art-historical scholarship. Take his *jilian* (couplets with assembled characters) in clerical script as an example. In his inscriptions on these couplets, Lau often states the

history, location and style of the original stele, and cites the comments of his predecessors. In *Situ Taishi Couplet* (Figure 1), Lau wrote:

I rendered this work with characters assembled from *the Stone Engraving Commemorating the Opening of the Baoxie Road* from the Han Dynasty. This cliff carving in clerical script was produced in the sixth year of the Eastern Han's Yongping era, with the original stone located in the Shimen Gully on the north side of Baocheng, Shaanxi. It is now preserved in the Hanzhong Museum, Shaanxi. The original stone carving was made on a cliff, hence the character shapes and structures are varied, following the natural contours of the stone, irregularly arranged, leaning to the left and right, and naturally composed and formed. The brushwork is unrestrained and vigorous, with an honest and unadorned charm; each character is unique, wild and untrammelled, beyond ordinary scrutiny! Kang Nanhai (Kang Youwei) praised it as “transforming the round into the square, and simplifying the complex,” and also said that “the clerical-script work was executed with the brush method of seal script.” Yang Shoujing highly praised it as a “divine” piece.

Frequently featured in Lau's citation, Kang Youwei is a major figure in Lau's scholarship. Another figure often cited by Lau is Yang Shoujing (1938-1915), who is an epigraphy (*jinshi*) scholar. His commentaries on steles often served as Lau's reference. Such kind of inscription embodies not only Lau's learning of calligraphy, but also his views on the stylistic features of the origin stele. Another example is the *Liyi Xudao Couplet* (Figure 2), which reads:

The Stele of Jing Jun from Beihai, the Former Governor of Yizhou during the Han Dynasty, is currently housed in the Jining Museum, Shandong. The inscription on the stele records that after Jing Jun's death, his subordinates, admiring his virtue, erected a monument in his honour. The calligraphy on this stele is pure and ancient, with a rich and elegant charm. It is considered a wonderful work of Han clerical script. The brushwork often reflects the legacy of seal script and the vertical strokes exhibit the suspended-needle technique. Kang Nanhai (Youwei) commented, “The ancient aura is majestic, with the use of seal-script strokes in the extending feet similar to the Stele of Tianfa Shenchen, as the scripts before the reign of Emperor He all carried the essence of seal script.” Yang Shoujing said, “The clerical script has evolved from square to elongated, initiating a style of steep and upright calligraphy. Guo Lanshi (Guo Xiangxian) suggested, “To learn [the calligraphic style of] Ouyang Xun (557-641), one should start with the Stele of Zheng Gu and the Stele of Jing Jun.” I appreciate the wonderful transition from seal script to clerical script in the inscription on this stele, thus gathering a few characters from it to form a couplet. The brushwork is untrammelled and uninhibited, just for my own amusement.

To illustrate his own calligraphic styles, here Lau cites Yang Shoujing's commentary from *Ping beiji*, while also citing Kang Youwei's comparison between *Tianfa Shenchen Stele* and *Jingjun Stele*. As for his piece titled *Inspirational Poetic Lines by Tao Yuanming in Small Seal Scripts* (Figure 3), Lau executed 10 Chinese characters from the lines of Tao's poem (“Picking chrysanthemum flowers by the eastern hedge, I gaze at South Mountain in the distance”). In the inscription, Lau writes,

Once, I had a chance to take a good look at one white-legend seal by Ding Jing. On the seal, Ding engraved the following lines of Tao Yuanming: “Picking chrysanthemum flowers by the eastern hedge, I gaze at South Mountain in the distance.”⁴ Ding's brushstrokes are purely simple and sturdy, and his engraving is unadorned



Figure 1: Lau Chak Kwong, *Situ Taishi Couplet* / Clerical Script / Ink on paper / a pair of hanging scrolls / 114 x 34 cm each



Figure 2: Lau Chak Kwong, *Liyi Xudao Couplet* / Clerical Script / Ink on paper / a pair of hanging scrolls / 70.5 x 15 (each)

and austere, evoking a lofty realm beyond imagination. Overall, the seal style is markedly different from the neat symmetry commonly found in the aesthetics of the white-legend seals of the Han dynasty. Pursuing a seal-engraving style that is both archaic in sensibility and sturdy in form, Ding Jing strived to counter the gaudy and bizarre seal-engraving styles that had become prevalent since the Ming and early Qing dynasties. In the late spring of 2024, I rendered this work with inspirations from Ding's idea and artistic spirit while making some changes to it. Without my intentionality, the work is filled with “the spirit of metal and stone.”

Lau studied Ding Jing's works for his PhD dissertation; he has, therefore, thoroughly grasped the philosophy behind Ding's seal engraving practice. In this piece, Lau used calligraphy to reinterpret and remediate Ding's engraving style, and he expounded on Ding's aesthetic features as well as historical significance. All these intermedial encounters indicate the subtle relationship between Lau's calligraphy and his academic research.

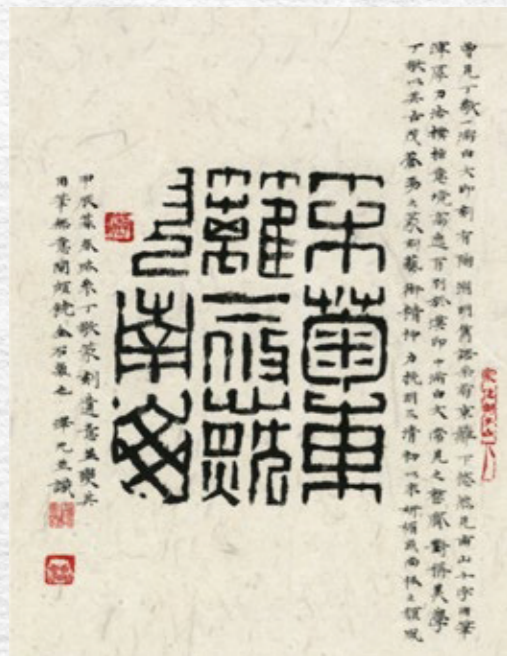


Figure 3: Lau Chak Kwong, *Inspirational Poetic Lines by Tao Yuanming in Small Seal Scripts* / Ink on paper / 38.4 x 25.5 cm



Figure 4: Lau Chak Kwong, *Jiji Niannian Couplet* / Ink on paper / a pair of hanging scrolls / 95.7 x 22 cm each

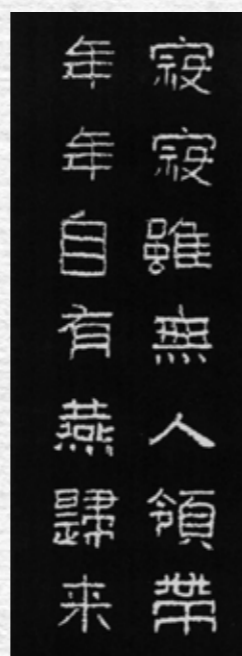


Figure 5: *Jilian With Characters Assembled from the Inscription of The Gwanggaeto Stele Bei*, rubbing, (in Hao Da Wang Bei *Jilian*, 83)

Locating Roots in Tradition

With his academic pedigree, Lau's art practice is always securely rooted in tradition. He knows perfectly well that all the calligraphy masters before him regarded antiquity as their sources of artistic creation, and he understands that the *dao* ("the Way") of calligraphy must rest on the premises of respecting, studying, and transforming antiquity. In view of this, Lau believes that calligraphy will never succeed if uprooted from tradition.

Among Lau's calligraphic works, his admiration for antiquity is fully on display in his calligraphic couplets with Chinese characters assembled from ancient stele inscription. Lau has written 36 entries for the exhibition catalogue *Double Beauty: Qing Dynasty Couplets from the Lechangzai Xuan Collection* and an article entitled "Big-character Couplets by Kang Youwei", and thus has a good understanding of the art of calligraphic couplet. Here, it is worth noting that when the Qing literati produced calligraphic couplets, they would either compose their own couplet-lines or write adoptions from ancient texts and poems. When adopting from ancient poetic lines or sentences, the assemblage couplet often shows a sense of natural charm of literature; and when selecting characters from ancient steles, the assemblage couplet reflects undoubtedly the calligraphers' obsession with the antiquity in addition to their literary talent. Although most contemporary calligraphers may not be as erudite as the ancients, they can resort to modern compilations of *jilian* for their convenient reference.⁵ Since Lau is an advocate for the clerical script, most of his *jilian* were drawn from famous steles of the Han and Wei dynasties, including inscriptions of ancient steles such as *the Stele of Sangong Mountain*, *Jingjun Stele*, *Yiying Stele*, *the Stele of Ritual Vessels*, *Xiaoguan Stele*, *Zheng Gu Stele*, *Ode to Fenglong Mountain*, *Yinzhou Stele*, *Huashan Stele*, *Hengfang Stele*, *Xiacheng Stele*, *Ode to*

Fuge, *Cao Quan Stele*, *Zhang Qian Stele*, *Tianfa Shenchen Stele* and *Hao Da Wang Stele (The Gwanggaeto Stele)*, as well as cliff inscriptions such as *Kaitong Baoxie Road Rock Carving*, *Ode to the Stone Gate*, and *The Diamond Sutra in the Stone Sutra Valley of Mount Tai*. Each of these ancient stele inscriptions has its own characteristics; the real challenge, however, lies in how to capture the spirit and charm. For Lau, it is imperative to interpret the calligraphy style and spirit of the original stele inscription. Take *Jiji Niannian Couplet* (Figure 4) as an example. This *jilian* was rendered with characters assembled from the inscription of *The Gwanggaeto Stele*. In the inscription of this work, Lau introduces the origin and background of the stele from Goguryeo and continued to write:

Demonstrating the beauty of the transition from clerical to regular script, the calligraphy of the stele is characterized by its profound and steady brushwork, ancient and simple elegance, square and well-proportioned structure, and the natural and scattered momentum of the strokes; it is full of rustic aura and naturalness as if achieved by heaven. In the book of *Guang Yizhou Shuangji*, Kang Nanhai (Youwei) wrote: "The inscriptions of the old town in Goguryeo and the stele of the Silla were produced by the distant barbarians from foreign lands. However, the work's grandeur and beauty are unparalleled through the ages."

Lau often cites Kang Youwei's commentaries in his academic research. Going beyond mere citation, however, I believe that Lau has technically and spiritually internalized the aesthetics of *The Gwanggaeto Stele* (Figure 5) in terms of brush method, character structure, and style. The rustic aura of the original stele inscription and its naturalness as if achieved by heaven became the realm that Lau aspired to achieve.

Lau's *jilian* calligraphy is not limited to works in clerical script. I also encompasses his bronze-script couplets with characters assembled from the inscriptions of *Ji Zibai Plate of the Guo State*, *San Family Plate*, *Cauldron of Ke*, *Wang Sun Chime Bells*, *Cauldron of Duke Mao*, *Cauldron of Yu*, *Cauldron of Hu*, *Cauldron of Song*, *Grain Receptacle of Qin Gong*, *Grain Receptacle of Pi Qi*, *Grain Receptacle of Gui Jiang*, as well as regular-script inscription of the *Cliff Inscription of Shimen*, *Yunfeng Shan Lunjingshushi* by Zheng Daozhao, *Stele of Cuan Longyan*, etc. More broadly, Lau's couplets were also rendered with characters assembled from oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty, testifying to Lau's deep love for ancient calligraphy traditions.

Thus far, the genre of *jilian* is only a small yet significant portion of Lau's oeuvre. His work encompasses a wide range of formats (from vertical scroll to horizontal and square format) and scripts (such as clerical script and other ancient scripts as well as the modern scripts such as Tang regular, running, and cursive scripts). As a matter of fact, Lau has a special preference for cursive-clerical script found on the bamboo slips of the Han dynasty. For example, his *Meijia Chuiyang Couplet* (Figure 6) consists of characters collected from the *Ode to the Stone Gate* (Figure 7). In this work, Lau endeavors to retain the texture of the stone on which characters are executed. Yet, Lau does it deftly. Resultantly, he injects new vitality into this canonical Han cliff engraving known as "clerical-cum-cursive script." As he explains in the inscription, this work only "modestly assimilates the brush methods of the Han bamboo slips." Another two non-*jilian* couplets in clerical script are also intriguing. The first one is *Yaliang Xuhuai Couplet* (Figure 8), which is loosely modelled after Zheng Fu's *Five-character-line Couplet in Clerical Script* (Figure 9).⁶ As Lau explains in the inscription, "Zheng Gukou's (Zheng Fu's) calligraphic works from his later years are full of strange variations, rich and unrestrained. With occasional incorporation of the brush methods of cursive script, his brushwork is swift and lively. With a little bit of inspiration from Zheng's ideas and brushwork, I added my own touch to this work." Apparently, Lau appreciates very much the practice of incorporating cursive-script ideas into clerical script in Zheng's later works. In comparison to Zheng's work, Lau's execution is more dynamic and livelier, as felt in the palpable contrast between wet and dry brushstrokes.

The second one is *Hanmo Deshi Couplet* (Figure 10), which is a calligraphic rendition of two poetic lines by Du Fu (712-770). Departing from the style of stele inscription in clerical script, this couplet was rendered with the brush methods of Han bamboo slips, thus showing irregular and tilted character structure. As Lau describes his style clearly in the inscription, "Feeling inspired by Du Fu's poem, I executed this work with overnight, leftover ink. Filled with rustic aura, my brushwork is spontaneous, untrammelled and sketchy. Not knowing whether the work is skillful or clumsy, I rendered this work just for my own amusement." Overall, Lau's study in clerical script is characterized by achieving a synergy between stele inscriptions and ancient bamboo slips. Lau was a student of Han Yunshan (1923-2010). In Lau's eyes, Han adopted "Han clerical script as the foundation of a convergence of the stele and model-book studies"⁷ In this light, Lau's calligraphy draws inspirations from not only his own scholarship in his academic research, but also his teacher's influence.

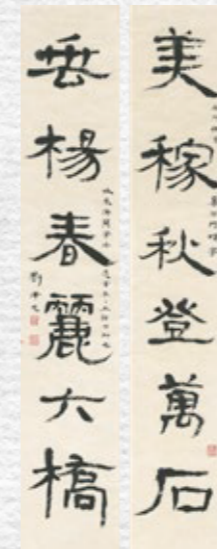


Figure 6: Lau Chak Kwong, *Meijia Chuiyang Couplet* / Ink on paper / a pair of hanging scrolls / 94 x 16.6 cm each

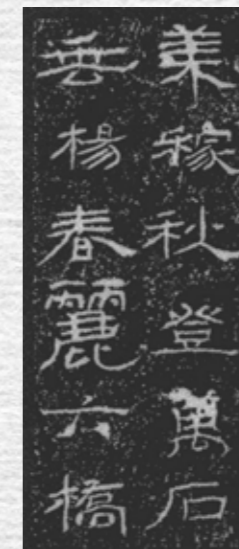


Figure 7: *Jilian With Characters Assembled from the Inscription of the Ode to the Stone Gate*, rubbing, (in *Shimen Song Jilian*, 28)



Figure 8: Lau Chak Kwong, *Yaliang Xuhuai Couplet* / Ink on paper / a pair of hanging scrolls / 120 x 24 cm each

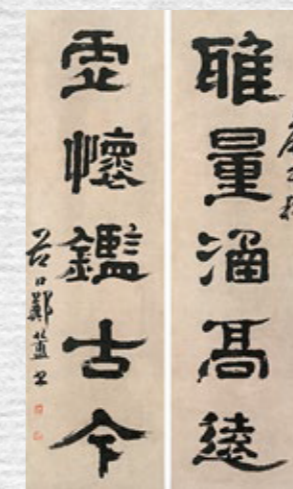


Figure 9: Zheng Fu, *Five-character-line Couplet in Clerical Script* / Ink on paper / a pair of hanging scrolls / 104.6 x 29.7 cm each (in Jason C. Kuo and Peter C. Sturman eds., *Double Beauty: Qing Dynasty Couplets from the Lechangzhai Xuan*, plate 8)

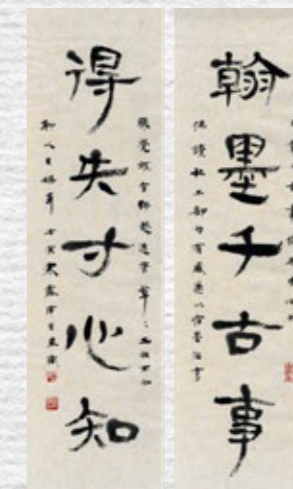


Figure 10: Lau Chak Kwong, *Hanmo Deshi Couplet* / Ink on paper / a pair of hanging scrolls / 97 x 23.1 cm each

Consistent with his embrace of the "sense of antiquity" (*guyi*), Lau is good at producing "black tiger" calligraphy (Figure 11). The term "black tiger" refers to the rubbing of stone inscriptions with white characters against a black background, while "black tiger" calligraphy is a form of art that mimics these rubbings through special techniques. One master of this genre is Luo Shuzhong (1898-1968), a prominent Hong Kong calligrapher. While Luo rendered this genre in clerical script (Figure 12), Lau's works are characterized by the square character shape in a script between seal and clerical scripts. With an unadorned and austere style, Lau's "black tiger" calligraphy accentuates the beauty of his reinterpretation of the mottled and rough textural effects on ancient, weathered steles. Though "black tiger" calligraphy is a minor genre in Lau's oeuvre, it witnesses his great passion for Han steles.

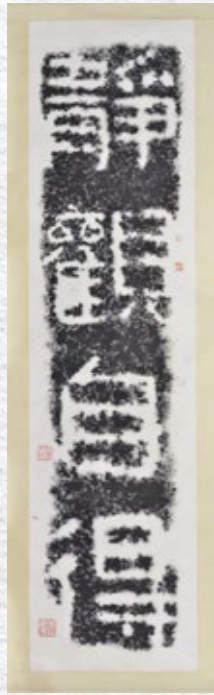


Figure 11: Lau Chak Kwong, *Contentment in Quiet Contemplation / "Black-Tiger" Calligraphy* / Ink on paper / hanging scroll / 225 x 57.5 cm



Figure 12: Luo Shuzhong, *Gunxue / "Black-Tiger" Calligraphy* / Ink on paper / horizontal hanging scroll / 59 x 130cm (in *Luo Shuzhong Bainian Huigu*, plate 40)

Synchronizing with the Times

Through the ages, calligraphers have all advocated learning from the past while transforming antiquity. Calligraphers in each time period are, therefore, by no means bound by the same tradition; instead, they choose to make innovations with their preferred as well as the prevalent aspects of traditions. For example, calligraphers in the Jin dynasty advocated the importance of *yun* ("resonance" or "aura"); in the Tang dynasty *fa* ("method" and/or "standard"); in the Song dynasty *yi* ("idea" or "spontaneity" beyond rules and conventions), in the Yuan and Ming dynasties *tai* ("form"), and in the Qing dynasty *zhi* ("rusticity"). Keenly aware of his continuation of this long genealogy, Lau continues to strive for changes and seek modernity in his practice of calligraphy.

Lau's calligraphy demonstrates a variety of tactics in seeking novelty and transformations. Among all such innovative works, calligraphy sculptures appear to fit the contemporary trend most. This genre is fundamentally sculpture with substantial calligraphic elements. In my opinion, however, Lau's signature works that reflect his extraordinary unique personal approach is his exceedingly large-scale calligraphy. As Lau himself puts it, such kind of calligraphy is "deeply influenced by Kang Youwei's theories of *bangshu* (big-character calligraphy) ... [and based] on the rounded brushwork and broad character structuring of *The Diamond Sutra in the Stone Sutra Valley of Mount Tai*, striving for naturalness, tranquility and refined simplicity."⁸ Developing on the basis of traditional *bangshu*, the size of Lau's paper or canvas is much larger, and hence much more powerful visual impact. Take one of his pieces entitled *Tiny Dust* (*Weichen*, Figure 13) as an example. The two characters *wei* ("tiny") and *chen* ("dust") were executed with masculine, archaic and solemn sensibility, emitting a lingering resonance of *The Diamond Sutra in the Stone Sutra Valley of Mount Tai*. More importantly, the work is huge in size and hence compelling in a powerfully irresistible way. Intriguingly, Lau's inscription on this piece contains a profound

message, as he wrote, "In the summer of 2013, I gazed at the starry night, and couldn't help marveling at the tininess of humans, just like a tiny speck of dust. The poet Su Shi once wrote, 'We are but mayflies lodging between heaven and earth, single grains adrift, far out on the dark blue sea. We grieve that our lives last only a moment, and we covet the endlessness of the great river.'⁹ What a thought-provoking line by Su Shi." Lau cites lines from Su Shi's (1037-1101) poem *Rhapsody on Red Cliff* (*Chibi fu*) to express his feelings about the tininess of humans. However, the two characters of "tiny" and "dust" in this work are not tiny at all, and they are very big indeed; how witty of Lau to do so! In another large-scale work, Lau escalates this humorous sense of contrast further; just as Su Shi famously wrote that human beings are nothing but "mayflies between heaven and earth, single grains adrift, far out on the dark blue sea," Lau again reinterprets such a message in oversized characters. He executes these two lines, that consist of 12 characters, on a set of 12 screens (Figure 14). All these screens are taller than the average human body, making it all the more stunning than the *Tiny Dust* piece.

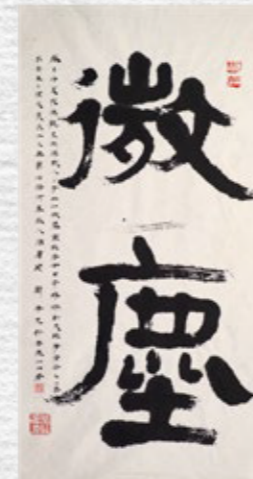


Figure 13: Lau Chak Kwong, *Tiny Dust / Oversized-character Calligraphy* / Ink on paper / hanging scroll / 248 x 129 cm



Figure 14: *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 / Ink on paper / hanging scrolls, 340 x 144 cm each

Lau's oversized-character calligraphy has spawned another line of his artistic production, which he calls "calligraphy performance" and "calligraphy improvisation in response to the surroundings." In these indoor and outdoor performances, Lau rolled out huge canvases to cover the ground, and executed his calligraphy surrounded by audience members (Figures 15 and 16). Traditionally, calligraphy has always been a studio art for literati only, and therefore does not feature such thing as performance. One possible example of such calligraphic performance could be found in the monk-calligraphers of cursive script (*caoshu*) in the Tang dynasty. These monks love to execute cursive-script calligraphy in restaurants and public spaces. Yet such "performances" were rare and short-lived, and they never turned into a trend.¹⁰ More akin to performance was the tradition of public improvisation



Figure 15: Lau Chak Kwong, *Tapping the Metropolis Rhythm: Whole-Body Rendition of the Calligraphic Brush / Oversized-character Calligraphy / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy (with elements of social media and live interaction between the artist and audience) / 2016*



Figure 16: *The Wonderful Cross / Oversized-character Calligraphy / Invited public performance of Chinese calligraphy / Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre (Grade II historic building of Hong Kong) / Curated and organized by Showers of Blessing Evangelistic Ministry / 2023*

in traditional elegant gathering of art exchange among Chinese literati. In Hong Kong's pre-war calligraphy circle, Toh Kee-cheung (Du Qizhang, 1897-1942) attracted much attention for his impromptu calligraphic performance in public.¹¹ According to one newspaper report, this "performance" took place in an art exhibition co-organized by Chung Sing Benevolent Society and Hong Kong Society of Calligraphy, Painting and Literature in June 1934 "With no prior preparation, Toh produced a big-character calligraphic work (*bangshu*) on a piece of white cloth (of around 10 feet) that covered the ground. He took off his shoes and jumped onto the cloth. Rolling on the ground and spinning like a tornado, he finished executing four Chinese characters *huan wo he shan*, meaning 'return us our [lost] lands!' in the blink of an eye. The audience all gave him a big hand and cried 'bravo.'"¹²

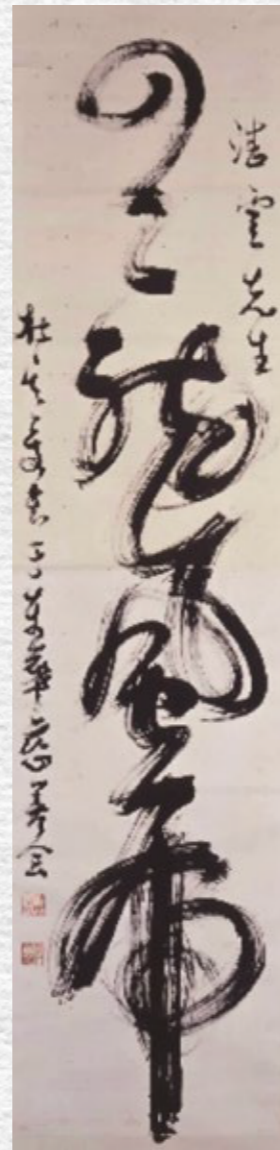


Figure 17: Toh Kee-cheung, *Cloud, Dragon, Wind and Tiger / Ink on paper / hanging scroll / 1934 / 265 x 66 cm / Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art*

At the time, many considered Toh's works in cursive script idiosyncratic and groundbreaking as they were executed while rolling on the ground. One of Toh's works in such genre is a hanging scroll with the four characters *Yun long feng hu* (*Cloud, Dragon, Wind and Tiger*) in cursive script, currently collected by the Hong Kong Museum of Art (Figure 17). It was an improvisational work performed at the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals' Fundraising Carnival held in Lee Garden in October 1934. While Lau is a successor to Toh's pioneering calligraphic endeavor, his calligraphy is more gigantic and his performance is of a much larger scale than those of his predecessors. Also distinctive is Lau's archaic principle in using clerical scripts. In terms of content, he designs the literary content of his calligraphic works according to the specificity of different venues where he often interacts with his audience. All these interesting elements make his "gigantic calligraphic performances" more appealing than usual.

Conclusion

The world of Daniel Lau's calligraphy is packed with insights revolving around the dichotomies between past and present, inheritance and change, as well as the revival of antiquity and innovation. His academic research has provided a solid basis of theory and calligraphy history for his practice of art. As a result, his artistic pursuit is backed by tradition and characterized by his unique approach to the adoption of Han clerical script as his creative fountainhead. His works have, therefore, demonstrated his persistence in advocating epigraphical calligraphy and his distinctive ability to reinterpret tradition. Mindful of tradition, yet at the same time, Lau is highly aware that calligraphy must also keep in step with the times. Hence, working on the basis of not rebelling against tradition, he pursues the utmost degree of innovation with his broad vision. For example, while his signature large-scale calligraphy has rigorously preserved the traditional principle of "methods and rules" (*fadu*), Lau's artistic approach—with such elements as live performance, site-specificity, gigantic scale and audience participation—synchronizes with common elements and modes of expression in Western contemporary art. Lau's other tactics in pursuing contemporaneity include incorporating seal-engraving elements into calligraphy, applying calligraphy to different everyday objects, expressing literary content pertinent to social issues in contemporary life, etc.

Finally, it should be noted that, in addition to his research in the history of ancient calligraphy, Lau's academic research also includes the history of Hong Kong calligraphy.¹³ He understands how Hong Kong calligraphy in the past century has already moved on from the stage of "transplantation of tradition" towards the stage where tradition must survive through synchronizing with the global world in a new time period.¹⁴ In a nutshell, Lau's thoughtful and well-conceived creative vision and path are extraordinarily inspirational for all young and aspiring calligraphers in Hong Kong.

Endnote:

¹ See Lau Chak Kwong, “The Refreshing Paradox of Embracing Innovation for a Return to Antiquity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Integration of Art Historical Research with Creative Art Practice of Chinese Calligraphy,” in Tam Wai-ping ed., *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2018* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2019), 192-237.

² See Jason C. Kuo and Peter C. Sturman eds., *Double Beauty: Qing Dynasty Couplets from the Lechangzai Xuan Collection* (Hong Kong: Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003)

³ Lau Chak Kwong, “Xiling bajia de lishu” [The Clerical Script of Xiling Eighter Masters], in Harold Mok ed., *Double Beauty II: Qing Dynasty Couplets from the Lechangzai Xuan Collection* (Hong Kong: Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007), 44-51; “Kang Youwei de bangshu duilian” [Big-character couplets by Kang Youwei], in Harold Mok and Chen Yafei ed., *Shuhai guanlan er: Yinglian, tiexue, shuyi guoji yantaohui lunwenji* [Looking at the sea of calligraphy II: collected essays from the international conference of couplets, tie-carving and calligraphic art] (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts and Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008), 475-492; “Lun Kang Youwei (858-1927) shufa lilun ji shijian zhong yunhan de rujia meixue sixiang” [On the Confucian aesthetics and ideas of Kang Youwei’s calligraphic theory and practice], in *Rujia meixue sixiang de xiandai chanshi: liang’an sande shoujie Zhongguo meixue xueshu yantao hui lunwenji* [Modern interpretations of Confucian aesthetics and thoughts: collected essays on the inaugural academic conference on Chinese aesthetics across the straits] (Shaanxi: Shaanxi Normal University, 2009), 79-86; “Hanbei dui Zheng Fu de qishi [How Stelae of the Han Dynasty Inspired Zheng Fu],” in Macau Museum of Art ed., *Against or Away: Proceedings of the Symposium on Artworks by Ming Loyalists in Early Qing Dynasty* (Macau: Macau Museum of Art, 2018), 338-363.

⁴ English translation by Tian Xiaofei, cited from her book *Tao Yuanming & Manuscript Culture: the Record of a Dusty Table* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 24.

⁵ Publications on *jilian* abound. For major and large-scale stele *jilian*, see Tianjin Renmin Meishu Chubanshe’s *Zhongguo lidai beiti jilian* and Henan Meishu Chubanshe’s *Zhongguo lidai jingdian beitie jilian xilie*.

⁶ To take a closer look of this couplet, see Plate 8 of Jason C. Kuo and Peter C. Sturman eds., *Double Beauty: Qing Dynasty Couplets from the Lechangzai Xuan*. The entry is written by Lau Chak Kwong himself. See the appendix on page 351.

⁷ Lau Chak Kwong Daniel, “Clerical script of the Han dynasty as the Foundation of a Convergence of the Stele and Model-book Studies: The Calligraphy of Han Yunshan,” in Tang Kam-tang ed., *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2013* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2014), 64-94°

⁸ Lau Chak Kwong, “The Refreshing Paradox of Embracing Innovation for a Return to Antiquity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Integration of Art Historical Research with Creative Art Practice of Chinese Calligraphy,” 223.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ For more on the Buddhist monk-calligraphers who practiced cursive styles in the Tang dynasty, see Huang Weizhong, “Zhongwan Tang de caoshuseng,” [Buddhist monk-calligraphers of cursive styles] in *Tangdai shufa shi yanjiu ji* [Collected essays on the history of Tang calligraphy] (Taipei: Huifengtang, 1994), 40-55.

¹¹ Translator’s note: Here I follow the documented romanization of Toh’s name as “Toh Kee-cheung,” and provided a pinyin version of his name after it. See the entry on Toh in *The Hong Kong Image Database* of The University of Hong Kong, <https://digitalrepository.lib.hku.hk/catalog/n583xw90f#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1303%2C-56%2C3353%2C1111>, last accessed 26 July 2024.

¹² “Zhongshengshe shuhua zhanlan hui xuxun,” *Gongshang Ribao* (The Kung Sheung Daily News), 5 June 1934; Harold Mok and Chen Yafei eds., *Xianggang shufa nianbiao, 1901-1950* [Chronicle of Hong Kong calligraphy: 1901-1950] (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), 125.

¹³ Daniel Chak-kwong Lau is a three-time winner of the General Research Fund (GRF) offered by Hong Kong’s University Grants Committee (UGC), all of which have been dedicated to the study of Chinese calligraphy in Hong Kong.

¹⁴ For more on such notion as the “transplantation of tradition” in pre-war Hong Kong, see Chen Yafei, *Chuantong de yizhi: Xianggang shufa yanjiu (1911-1941)* [The transfer of traditions: A study of Hong Kong calligraphy (1911-1941)] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2019).