

Understanding the Colors in the Modern Calligraphy of Wang Dongling and Qiu Zhijie

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Abstract: Chinese modern calligraphy has served as a connection between traditional, Western, modern, and contemporary art throughout the past few decades. It clearly exhibits a strong link with and mutual influences from worldwide art. In both Chinese traditional calligraphy and modern calligraphy, the significance of colour has always been of secondary importance. Various contemporary calligraphy styles offer several options for ink to be used in the practice of modern calligraphy. In the 21st century, the advancement of easel painting and creative forms has expanded the range of materials and equipment of mediums available for contemporary Chinese calligraphy. This new form of calligraphy and ink painting create a mutually beneficial relationship, serving as a strong foundation for the advancement of modern calligraphy. This paper examines the colour usage in the Chinese modern calligraphy works of Wang Dongling and Qiu Zhijie. It aims to explore the various forms of ink painting in traditional calligraphy and analyse the influence of ink painting, as well as the colours in other tools and media, on the spatial composition and visual tension in modern calligraphy. Additionally, it investigates the emotional expression generated by colour from an abstract perspective.

Keywords: Chinese modern calligraphy; Wangdongling; Qiuzhijie; Colours

1. Introduction

The prevailing viewpoint maintains that calligraphy is primarily a monochromatic craft, with only a little use of colour. Historical documents reveal that ink was available in several colours such as black, vermilion, and gold. Similarly, paper was categorised into many shades including white, blue, and yellow. During the evolution of calligraphy, ink is categorised into five distinct colours. The diverse variations of ink and wash significantly broaden the visual range of pointillism lines, fully showcasing their richness and effectively enhancing the formal aesthetics of calligraphy. In the 21st century, the advancement of easel painting and creative forms has expanded the range of materials and equipment of mediums available for contemporary Chinese calligraphy.

1.1. The Color Forms in Calligraphy

The colour in modern calligraphy can be divided into: (1) The colour of ink is the main visual form element. Various contemporary calligraphy styles offer alternative ink options for calligraphy expression. The ink and colour of elements in line with the visual form of modern calligraphy are excavated from the texture effect expressed by the brush and ink techniques in traditional calligraphy. This particular kind of contemporary calligraphy and ink painting create a mutually beneficial relationship, serving as a strong foundation for the advancement of modern calligraphy. (2) Visual elements with colour tendencies produced by tools, materials or media other than the colour of ink.

Throughout the evolution of contemporary calligraphy, artists have undertaken many experiments involving a range of materials, equipment, and media. This article explores the use of colour in calligraphy, encompassing traditional easel artworks as well as experimental installations and modern art.

1.2. Research Purposes

This article examines the utilisation of colour in contemporary calligraphy pieces created by Wang Dongling and Qiu Zhijie. It aims to comprehend the transformations and advancements in colour from traditional calligraphy to modern calligraphy, while also investigating the cultural and symbolic importance of colour in modern calligraphy works.

Through an examination of the precise impact of colour application in contemporary Chinese calligraphy on the viewer's visual perception and emotional expression, we can gain insights into the significance of colour in shaping the viewer's visual experience and emotional response. This analysis allows us to delve into the mechanisms and functions of colour in calligraphy artworks and examine the diverse visual manifestations and representations of colour in calligraphy artworks.

This article examines the avant-garde and exploratory use of colour in contemporary Chinese calligraphy, and analyse how calligraphers creatively employ colour in their artworks and experiment with various mediums. Through an examination of case studies and practical experiences in calligraphy, we may analyse the influence of colour on the advancement and growth of calligraphy art, as well as its effect on the variety of artistic expressions within calligraphy.

2. Analysis of Wang Dongling's Modern Calligraphy Works

2.1. Academic Journey

Wang Dongling, born in 1945, was born in Rudong, Jiangsu Province. In 1966, he graduated from the Fine Arts Department of Nanjing Normal University, and in 1981, he graduated from the first calligraphy graduate of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art). He is now the director, professor and doctoral supervisor of the Modern Calligraphy Research Center of China Academy of Art.

2.2. Colour in Calligraphy Works

Wang Dongling is a very skilled calligrapher with a deep understanding of ancient techniques. His cursive handwriting not only showcases the immediate creation of visual art but also investigates the potential for advancing modern calligraphy across several mediums. Given the evolution of Wang's body of work over the past fifty years, it is preferable to adopt an integrative interpretation that encompasses all of the aforementioned aspects, and potentially more. This is because his works typically exhibit a consolidative approach that seeks to harmonise differences, as suggested by Hertel's perspective^[1].

Wang Dongling frequently employs variations in ink and wash techniques to depict the condition of colour in his artworks. This innovative approach is highly apparent. The novelty in his calligraphy lies in the use of abstract ink painting, which encompasses three key elements: abstract art, the utilisation of unique materials, and the employment of distinctive visual shapes. Wangdongling adapts Western abstract painting techniques and visual forms to create calligraphy works that embody spatial composition and tension. His aim is to convey Eastern abstract ink art and push the boundaries of traditional calligraphy principles in terms of spiritual and conceptual expression.



Figure 1: Wang Dongling, 'Daochong' 300×145cm, 2005, paper, ink

This endeavour employs rice paper, ink, calligraphy, textual elements, and symbolic motifs to delineate an enigmatic spatial construct. (Figure 1) The aggregation of copious ink assumes a salient role as a visual expressive component. Contrasted against the white void, it engenders a multi-dimensional realm, thereby transmuting the ostensibly two-dimensional plane of calligraphic expression into a semblance of three-dimensional space. The stark dichotomy between black and white engenders a profound visual resonance. Independent of the penmanship technique employed, the utilization of these singular hues, black and white, imbues the calligraphic composition with profound emotional resonance, evoking associations with the viewer's existential state.

Since the 1980s, two predominant models of contemporary calligraphic creation methods have emerged in China: one seeks to preserve the ontological essence of calligraphy's inscription and interpretation while innovating in terms of individuality and emotive expression, thus transcending traditional norms. The other model entails structural alterations, material substitutions, and the integration of multimedia technologies, among other innovations, thereby departing entirely from the intrinsic essence of calligraphy. According to Chu Chu's perspective, this approach manifests in forms such as abstract ink painting, performance art, conceptual installations, and other avant-garde expressions that transcend conventional notions of calligraphy [2].

In the quest for modern avenues to articulate calligraphy, Wang Dongling has ventured into diverse modes of expression within the realm of contemporary art practice. Wang Dongling's recent exploration in calligraphy encompasses innovative approaches such as silver salt calligraphy and object photography. His silver salt calligraphy represents a contemporary fusion of calligraphy and photography, leveraging traditional darkroom techniques to render calligraphic forms. Through this medium, he delves into the intricate textures of pen and ink, offering a novel perspective on the interplay between tradition and modernity in calligraphic creation.

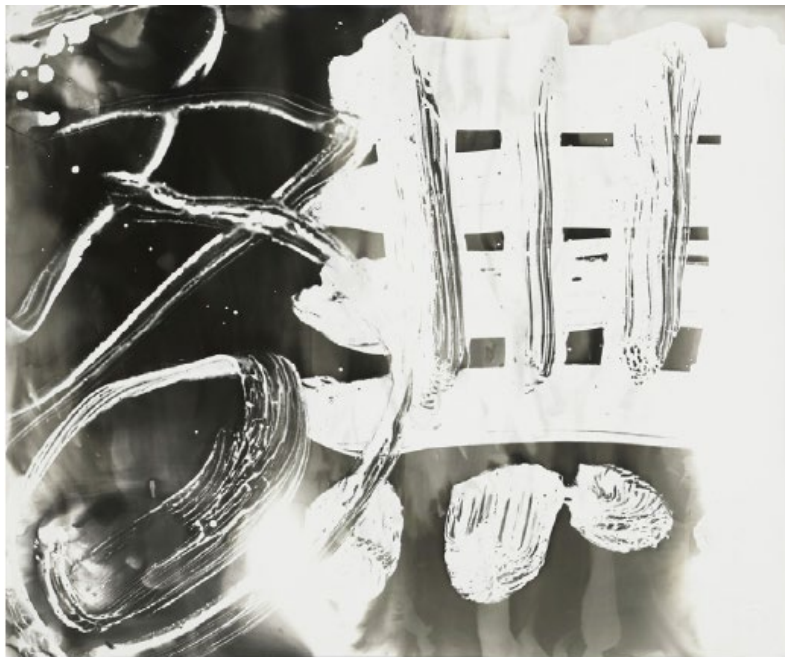


Figure 2: Wang Dongling, 'Nothing' 50.5x61cm 2013 Silver gelatin, pigment, ink

The incorporation of colour in this work is achieved through the amalgamation of silver salt material with the innate qualities of ink. (Figure 2) This innovative technique transcends the constraints of traditional ink, resulting in a fusion of acrylic and ink that yields unique colour effects. In conjunction with the subjective interventions during the development process, the static nature of photography converges with the dynamic qualities of calligraphy, imbuing the resultant amalgamation with a distinct allure accentuated by the interplay of colour effects. The calligraphic negatives imprinted on photographic paper evoke reminiscences of bronze artefacts or engraved inscriptions, while the intrinsic spontaneity emphasized by calligraphy engenders an entirely novel visual art form through the ambiguous nature of this medium.



Figure 3: 'Ten Scenes of the West Lake' photography, ink 3 100x100cm 2011

Viewers can readily discern that within this series of works, the legibility of calligraphy seamlessly merges with the photographic backdrop. (Figure 3) The black calligraphic strokes, departing from the traditional white substrate, now inhabit a pictorial realm characterized by pronounced visual contrast. Wang Dongling's perspective emphasizes the heightened visual resonance achieved through the symbiotic relationship between content and imagery, where the fusion of textual elements and pictorial representations mutually enriches each other's impact [3]. The integration of calligraphy within an image's layout and structure can profoundly influence its aesthetic impact. The effective management of this integration is crucial, as mishandling may lead to a composition that feels rigid and disjointed. However, the visual harmony achieved between colours and calligraphic lines within these artworks serves to validate this perspective.

2.3. Summary

This series exemplifies modern conceptualization, as the works seamlessly integrate written content with visual elements. Not only do the calligraphic lines merge harmoniously with the imagery, but the diverse background colours also enrich the fundamental essence of calligraphic creation. From the standpoint of modern calligraphy, the depiction of the interplay between lines, brush, ink, and space serves to compensate for the perceived deficiencies in the evolution of ink painting in the 21st century. Consequently, Wang Dongling's abstract ink paintings harbor profound philosophical implications. The meticulous brushwork texture and the subtle nuances inherent in the allure of "ink colour" within Wang Dongling's silver salt calligraphy exemplify the artist's distinctive aesthetic sensibility and unrestrained expression. The incorporation of colour in silver salt calligraphy transcends the confines of traditional paper-based writing, concurrently transmuted tangible script into a virtual, textured spatial dimension. This metamorphosis engenders a novel mode of expression within modern calligraphy, characterised by the interplay of light and shadow.

3. Analysis of Qiu Zhijie's Modern Calligraphy Works

3.1. Multifaceted Artistry

Qiu Zhijie was born in 1969 in Zhangzhou, Fujian Province. He graduated from the printmaking Department of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art) in 1992. Now he is a professor of the School of Trans-Media Art of China Academy of Art, director of the general Art Studio, and master and doctoral supervisor. Qiu Zhijie's artistic endeavours traverse a multitude of creative fields including painting, calligraphy, photography, installation, video, and performance. Through his diverse oeuvre, he delves into profound reflections on the philosophy of life, humanistic values, and the contemporary landscape of media.

3.2. Colour in Calligraphy Works

Qiu Zhijie's upbringing in calligraphy imbued words with a central significance throughout his artistic journey. Since the early 1990s, he has been actively engaged in the contemporary Chinese art scene, contributing to calligraphic creation in various capacities. Notably, his works 'Repetition to Write the Orchid Pavilion Preface a Thousand Time' and 'Twenty-Four Solar Terms' have emerged as seminal classics in the annals of contemporary Chinese art history.

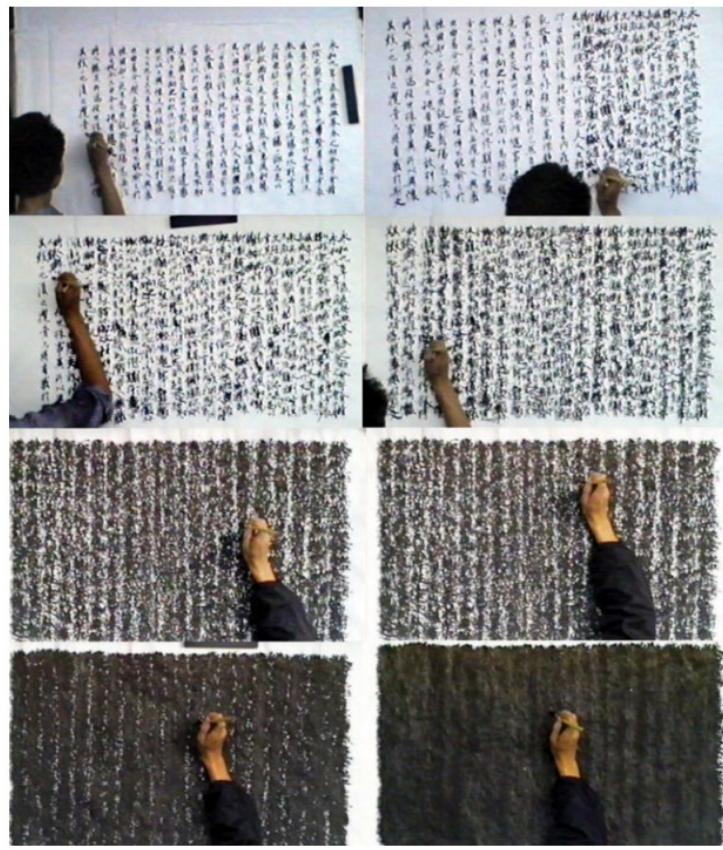


Figure 4: 'Writing the Preface to Lanting a Thousand Times' 120×60cm, 1990-1995, paper, ink

This article aims to explore the evolution of ink colour in Qiu Zhijie's work. Beginning with the initial writing phase, where the white background predominates visually, the process of repeated writing undertaken by the artist gradually shifts the focus towards the dominance of black ink. (Figure 4) This transition represents a significant evolution in colour dynamics, resulting in a visual subversion of traditional expectations.

The gradual transition from white to black in Qiu Zhijie's work underscores the artist's emphasis on inner self-expression within the fluidity of time. The culmination of countless ink strokes results in a final shade of black that is nuanced and complex, rather than pure. The ambiguous forms, which seem to oscillate between presence and absence, serve to guide the viewer's perception as they navigate from one inception to another within the spatial continuum. The shifting shades within the artwork transcend

the conventional realm of calligraphic expression, seamlessly integrating it into the broader context of modern art.



Figure 5: Calligraphy photography, 133*100 cm, 2006

This series of works by Qiu Zhijie features the innovative technique of using a flashlight to inscribe traditional Chinese cultural motifs against a backdrop of mysterious darkness. (Figure 5) The artist captures these actions through long exposures with a digital camera. Qiu Zhijie amalgamates this unique blend of writing and photography into a unified approach, aptly termed 'CALLI-PHOTO-GRAPHY', symbolising the fusion of calligraphy and photography. The interplay of light and photography in this work engenders colours that contrast with the white calligraphy. When viewed from the perspective of attenuating the textual elements, this combination generates a visual narrative that enhances the overall experiential quality of the artwork.

The artist endeavours to employ light as a tool for shaping, leveraging its temporal quality to dictate the rhythm of writing, and harnessing the background colour to evoke cultural and traditional associations in the viewer's consciousness.





Figure 6: Qiu Zhijie, 'Bustling vegetable market', Beijing, 2021

The above describes a contemporary visual art piece created by Qiu Zhijie in a bustling vegetable market in Beijing in 2021. (Figure 6) Over the course of two weeks, the artist meticulously inscribed thousands of words, infusing the vibrant market space with the timeless elegance of calligraphy. Qiu Zhijie posits that calligraphy transcends traditional constraints and can be executed with diverse tools such as brushes, pens, or even pencils, and in various mediums including English script or through the use of a flashlight in darkness. Furthermore, he contends that the surrounding colours of the environment serve as the backdrop for his works, while calligraphy itself embodies a spectrum of expressive forms. The artist's perspective is intriguing: 'Once calligraphy is regarded as an art and showcased in exhibitions, it loses its essence.'

The significance of this work lies in its adherence to the intrinsic standards of calligraphy. Through the interplay of ink, red, yellow, blue, and other elements, it achieves a harmonious fusion. Rather than appearing contrived, these elements serve as expressions of life states and abstract emotions. It represents a liberation of calligraphic values and underscores the importance of artistic freedom and expression. The author of this article believes that colour actually represents various characters, various commodities and living conditions in his works, and the combination with calligraphy creates new experiences.

3.3. Summary

The incorporation of colour in the modern calligraphy works of Wang Dongling and Qiu Zhijie is characterized by experimentation and innovation. They endeavour to explore unique colour expressions that align with their individual styles by employing diverse colour combinations, line structures, and compositional forms. This experimental approach not only pushes the boundaries of traditional calligraphy but also adds depth and richness to their artistic expressions.

4. Conclusion

When considering the calligraphic works of Wu Shanzhuan, Tang Kaizhi, and Zhu Qingsheng, it becomes evident that colour has been extensively incorporated into modern calligraphy. The utilization of vibrant and contrasting colours serves to impart a potent visual impact upon the audience. Kandinsky's analyses of forms and colours result not from simple, arbitrary idea associations but from the painter's inner experience. He emphasized the connection between straight lines and colour, cold and warm, and laid the foundation for lyrical abstraction using an independent painting language^[4].

As a fundamental element of art, the role of colour in modern calligraphy transcends the boundaries of traditional practice. This innovative use of colour surpasses the constraints of conventional calligraphy, broadening the expressive possibilities within the realm of calligraphic art and imbuing works with greater diversity and enriched visual effects.

In the context of calligraphy, colour should evolve in tandem with advancements in modern

technology, facilitating expanded artistic expression and enhanced visual effects. There is a need to experiment and explore the utilization of colour, aiming to achieve a harmonious balance among ink, paper, and seal colours. Such a thoughtful combination can effectively highlight the inherent charm and cultural significance of calligraphy ^[5].

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