

Behind the Image, Beyond the Image

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Liu Yonggang and the Images of Chinese Calligraphy

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Abstract The idea that Chinese characters are essentially pictures interests many artists of the contemporary scene that use the ambivalence of Chinese calligraphy to break up the normative communication system. Liu Yonggang (Genhe, 1964) is a singular case because in *Standing Characters* he dismantles the ordinary reading process of Chinese characters, maintaining the cognitive purpose of the ideographic language. Since the use of words in Liu's production is not limited to his renowned anthropomorphic sculptures, the paper presents the overlapping of visual and verbal languages in different artworks focusing on the 'intermediality' aspect of his art. The mutual references of word and image are investigated to unveil the artist adoption of words and pictures as a whole and a unique entity, rather than a totality of complementary and interrelated languages.

Keywords Liu Yonggang. Chinese Contemporary art. Word-picture relationship. Iconotext. Re-iconocity of characters. 刘永刚. 当代艺术.

Summary 1 Introduction: The Use of Words in Liu Yonggang's Artworks. – 2 The *Standing Character* Series: Universal Symbols from Ancient Scripts. – 3 Liu Yonggang's Works: Chinese Iconotext? – 4 Conclusion.



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The relationship between calligraphy and painting is a huge hornet's nest that should be approached gingerly, for even the slightest touch is likely to stir up endless trouble. (Qi Gong, *The Relationship between Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting*, 1991)

1 Introduction: The Use of Words in Liu Yonggang's Artworks

Starting from the last decade of the twentieth century the idea that Chinese characters are essentially pictures, and appeal therefore to the eyes, interests many artists of the contemporary scene that use the ambivalence of Chinese calligraphy, as word and picture, to break up the normative communication system and create new unreadable characters. Broadly speaking, the transformation from the Chinese language into figurative lexical icons has been studied by the critics in the post-Mao era framework, considering the propaganda rhetoric trauma and the wave of postmodernism that ran in China during the 1980s.

These Chinese artists aimed to build a culturally neutral language from the shape of the Chinese characters, dismantling Chinese linguistic features and making a subsequent reformulation of its formal aspect. It is the case of the *Standing Characters*, the art series produced by Liu Yonggang¹ that consists of anthropomorphic sculptures, whose forms were shaped drawing upon ancient calligraphic styles. Even though the *Standing Characters* series is characterised by fictional Chinese characters and has some analogies with these pseudo characters, or disguised characters general trend, Liu's sculptures call for a different interpretation. Two elements mainly differentiate Liu Yonggang from artists like Xu Bing:² firstly, Liu Yonggang maintains the ideographic purpose of Chinese language, aiming to convey a decodable message starting from the picture; secondly, in his artistic production, the interplay between textual and visual meanings must be regarded in a more extensive way, also considering the use of calligraphy combined with paintings. For these reasons, the

I wish to thank Liu Yonggang for his kindness and friendliness. I deeply appreciate the time spent together talking about his art in Liu Yonggang's Beijing studio. I am also grateful for all the subsequent interviews and for granting the right to reprint his works in this article.

1 Liu Yonggang (Genhe, 1964) is Member of China Artists Association and Distinguished Professor at China Academy of Fine Arts. He was appointed Director of the Creation Department of China Academy for Contemporary Sculpture. He won several awards in Mainland China and abroad receiving international recognition. His sculptures are widely collected by national and international art galleries and institutions.

2 For an overall study on the artist see Fraser, Li 2020.

following pages propose to focus on Liu Yonggang's use of characters and calligraphy as iconic and symbolic languages, beyond the political perspective, which is not compatible with Liu Yonggang's artwork. Liu Yonggang's interest in calligraphy is cultural rather than aesthetic or politically engaged. Like all the artists of his generation, during his youth, he spent most of the time copying master calligraphers to study the predecessors and understand the intimate relationship between calligraphy and painting. Since the bond word/picture in the Chinese context is not easy to untie in a few sentences, and it would be inappropriate here, I limit myself to introducing how Liu Yonggang uses writing and texts in his works of art.

The word/image relationship employed by the artist spread in different directions, for this reason he reveals to be an ideal case of study to approach the problem of the intermediality between verbal and visual systems in Chinese contemporary art. In fact, the way in which Liu Yonggang developed this trope, on one hand, recalls old practices, proper of the Chinese context, where painting, poetry and calligraphy were regarded as unity or 'three perfections';³ on the other, it sheds light on the potential role of the ideograms and the etymo-visual possibilities of characters in Contemporary art.

Besides being one of the representative artists who revisited the Chinese calligraphy to make up new images and universal symbols, Liu Yonggang's production provides a further extension of the words and picture relationship whose scrutiny seems to enlarge the debate on iconotext thanks to the feasible inclusion of the ideographic language perspective.

2 **The *Standing Character Series*: Universal Symbols from Ancient Scripts**

The geographical distance from home country is one of the typical circumstances for cultural roots reexamination: this utterance seems particularly valid for those artists who, after the artistic education in China, went abroad in the nineties, when one of the largest artistic diaspora occurred (Chiu 2006, 9). During an interview in his studio in Beijing, Liu Yonggang claimed that the years spent in Germany provoked the investigation of Chinese calligraphy. The cultural reflections upon writing methods of his motherland became Liu's most famous art series: *Standing Characters* (or in Chinese *zhanli de wenzi*).

Liu Yonggang was born in Inner Mongolia, more precisely in Genhe, in 1964. He trained in Beijing, at the oil painting department of CAFA (Central Academy of Fine Arts): from 1982 to 1986, he studied

3 See Murck, Fong 2020.

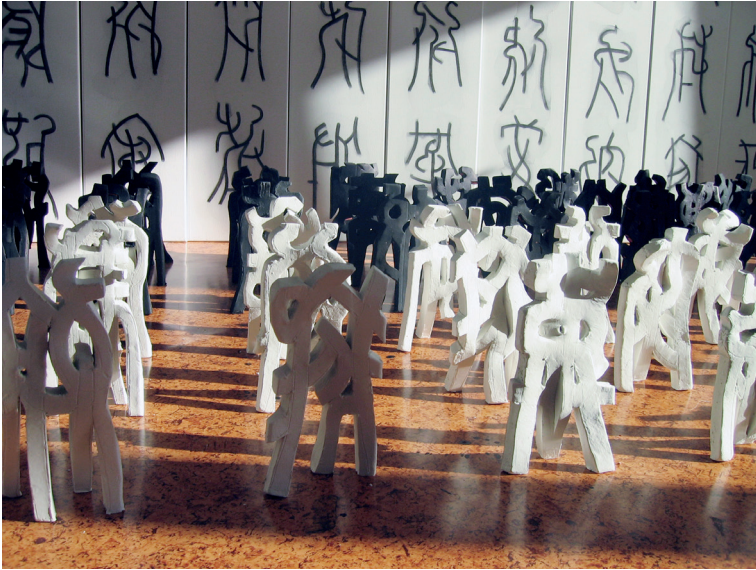


Figure 1 Casts in plaster for sculptures series *Standing Characters*. Copyright of the artist

realism with Jin Shangyi (Jiaozuo, 1934), a Chinese master painter of the last century who went to the Soviet Union during the 1950s for artistic education. After teaching at the Art Department of the Normal University in Inner Mongolia, Liu moved to Europe for four years (1992-1996) experiencing the ‘leave the country fever’. It was during his stay at the Nuremberg College of Fine Arts that he conceived the *Standing Characters* series. The stay overseas, on one hand, influenced the style of the artist, who became interested in German expressionism with references to Max Beckmann; on the other hand, living as a foreigner gave him the chance to think over his cultural tradition in other terms. In this biographical framework, Liu Yonggang decided to use the Sinitic writing, and its transformation during the centuries, to make up cross-cultural logos and icons exploring the status of the ideographic system as iconic and lexical.

In 1999 he began to work on the sculpture series that was titled after its anthropomorphic aspect. The sculptures that constitute the first series of *Standing Characters* are more than three meters high and simulate human attitudes. Nowadays most of them are exhibited in a theme park in the city of Ordos. The production of the series took about a decade for material selection and preliminary studies on Chinese ancient script forms [fig. 1]. The artist, in fact, chose to create



Figure 2 Liu Yonggang, *Standing Character – Embrace for Love*. 2009. Steel. Municipal Government Collection, Ordos. Copyright of the artist

the characters' new shapes starting from *Basiba* and *jiagu wen*, that respectively were a language used in the thirteenth century at the behest of Mongol ruler Qubilai, and oracle bone inscriptions, which are the earliest example of Chinese writing attested from Shang era (1600 BC-1046 BC).

In producing *Standing Characters*, Liu Yonggang was mainly interested in the formal aspect of the above-mentioned scripts for two reasons: firstly, people with standard modern Chinese literacy are

not able to read ancient scripts; secondly, his primary intention was to create fictional characters that stood for symbols. Albeit, the artist creates fictional characters, impeding modern Chinese speakers from reading his artworks as written language, the *Standing Characters* are semantically dense. In fact, these sculptures convey a message which is purely ideographic.

Bringing as an example one of the large-scale characters belonging to the subseries *Embrace for love* [fig. 2], the shape of the sculpture clearly impersonates two human bodies physically engaged in one hug, evoking a humanitarianism message or the Confucian concept of *ren* (a cornerstone of social and political doctrine based on benevolence and mutual love). Despite all the plausible interpretations of the human hug represented by the sculptures, the core of the *Standing Characters* series is the re-iconocity of the characters.

The idea that Chinese characters are symbols, rather than a conventional notation system for sounds, is the precondition assumed by the artist, who referred to traditional historiography and to Canjie myth of writing invention,⁴ to formulate the series. Since ancient times, the ideographic scripts and pictorial representations functioned as graphic signs to express contents, therefore they were regarded as undifferentiated languages able to convey concepts (Fong 2003, 259). The author exploits the pictographic principle on which Chinese language developed, and, at the same time, the potentiality of ideographic mechanism, to create his art and ascribe meanings to new characters, which are decodable by watching. Basically, the re-iconocity in his artistic process consists in giving new semantic properties to fictional characters by remolding their forms.

Since the sculptures of *Standing Characters* series cannot be read as words, the series activates a decoding process that is universal, like the symbols they represent. Making artworks for a global audience, independently from cultural origins, is a relevant topic that emerges in several Chinese artists that approach the Chinese language as a primary source for artistic production; among them Xu Bing and his installation *Book from the sky* can be taken as a canonical example:

Perhaps the key point of Xu Bing's *Book from the sky* is to establish a space where the putative language, word, or script cannot be claimed by any specific culture, a space where the East and the West cannot be easily separated. (Tsao 2011, xxiii)

⁴ According to the legend, Canjie, the inventor of Chinese writing, got the idea to use a pictographic system by watching animals' footprint and other natural phenomena; hence, the domination of *xiangxing* (representation of forms).

The well-known art installation, realised by creating *ex nihilo* Chinese characters that nobody could read, flatten differences between alphabetic language readers and logographic ones. Similarly to Xu Bing's invented characters, Liu Yonggang's sculptures are universal rather than culturally distinct, even if they belong to the Chinese tradition in terms of references. Despite the convergence in the outcome, the premises for Liu Yonggang's production deeply differ from the rebellion and subversion attributed to Xu Bing and Gu Wenda by the critics.⁵

Liu's sculptures convey messages restoring the union of *tushi* and *tuxing*, i.e. representation of ideas and representation of forms. The later work titled *Heaven, Earth and People Harmony*, in Chinese *tian di ren he*, dated 2014 and located in People's Square in Foshan, is an artistic elaboration from Chinese characters likewise. In this case, the artist used four different scripts (oracle bone inscriptions, *basi-ba*, bronze inscriptions and stone inscriptions) and a more consistent abstraction degree than in the *Standing Characters* series. In this case, he aimed to provide a symbol modelling each side of the sculpture with a relevant script. Thus, the four scripts/facades, which correspond to the four characters in artwork's title, are integrated into one structure made of mirrored stainless steel committed to absorbing the surrounding place and the cityscape.

The same principle of words transformation and alteration come to light in another series, such as *Character Changes (zi bian)* realised in 2007 - consisting of stylised ancient characters depicted on paper - proving that, in all artistic production of Liu Yonggang, words and calligraphy have been a paramount source since the 1980s, when the artist made some oil paintings that included characters and words.

3 Liu Yonggang's Works: Chinese Iconotext?

3.1 From Word to Image and Vice Versa

In the examples provided in the previous paragraph, the artist deprived characters of their original meanings creating new semantically dense logos starting from the camouflage of words. In brief, the Chinese language was used by the artist to make cross-cultural images. The iconicity of words and the visual arrangement of characters is not the only phenomenon that regards the relationship word/picture in Liu Yonggang's production. Indeed, it is possible to trace

⁵ For a sampling of the anti-writing phenomenon in Chinese Contemporary art see Wu 1999, 36-41; Salviati 2006, 34-87; Erickson 2001.



Figure 3 Liu Yonggang, *Apple n.1*. 2017. Oil painting, 80 × 60 cm. Copyright of the artist



Figure 4 Liu Yonggang, *Apple*. 2017. Steel sculpture. Copyright of the artist

a reverse trend in which paintings refer to characters beyond their formal likeness, recalling the phoneme.

In 2017, Liu Yonggang produced some oil paintings representing men bearing apples. In this series, human bodies and animals are depicted inside the fruit, which is simply outlined in the middle of the canvas [fig. 3]. In order to have a comprehensive interpretation of this artwork, the viewer must know that words and pictures may be semantically interchangeable. In Chinese language, the names used for 'apple' and 'peace' share one phoneme, thus, the pronunciation of both the words are very similar. Due to the phonetic coincidence, apples turned to symbolise peace. The *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* explains:

Even today, apples are relatively dear, and therefore an acceptable gift, especially since the apple (ping) can stand as a symbol for 'peace' (ping). On the other hand, one should not give apples to an invalid, since the Chinese word for 'illness' - bing - is very similar in sound to the word for apple. (Eberhard [1983] 1986, 16)

The iconography adopted by Liu evokes the concept of peace and universality independently from the apple symbolism, but it is thanks to the character mention that the artwork is complete and totally meaningful.

Liu Yonggang's use of words and pictures highlights that in his artistic research both are considered symbols, and he uses them as equal semiotic elements.

There are some cases in which words and pictures are directly combined, making their relationship and their mutual reference more concrete and effective. The sculpture *Apple* [fig. 4], realised in 2017, is an instance of this kind of match. It is constituted by a concave steel apple containing the modern character *de* (德) that in Chinese stands for morality and virtue, meaning that is visually rendered by the composition of the character as it evolved from Western Zhou historical era.⁶ In contrast with previous artworks, *Apple* contains a readable character, hence it entails reading and watching as separated and distinct actions, instead of a symbolic decoding of images derived from words. Thus, two counterparts - figurative and lexical - integrate each other in the sculpture, which becomes a verbal and visual artwork.

6 For the historical reconstruction of the character *de*, see Munro 1969.



Figure 5 Liu Yonggang, *Noumenon - Shrine*. 2019. 160 × 190 cm. Copyright of the artist

3.2 Words and Pictures in the Eastern Paradigm

In the introduction, I foresaw the two directions that the word/picture motif takes in Liu's production. In the cases presented above, the artist created his artworks taking advantage of the potentiality of the Chinese language as a system made of symbols, both written and depicted. In fact, *Standing Characters* and *Apple* paintings explore the character-picture relationship in this perspective; however, Liu Yonggang also formulates the dialogue between words and images in traditional painting with calligraphy compositions, recalling the eastern tradition to write poems on landscape paintings.

Chinese historiography presents poetry, painting and calligraphy as a crucial and unique topic of art history, since, from the eighth century onwards, they constitute the renowned 'three perfections'. Despite all the variability due to different historical eras and to artists' individual practices, in the Chinese context, poetic inscriptions on paintings were generally used to stimulate viewers' imagination and arouse emotions that might be enhanced by looking at the visual representation.

The work *Praise to Ancient Civilization* by Liu Yonggang reflects the painting and literature relationship in the Eastern paradigm, conceived as unity. The author organised the painting in two parts: he used the left part of the paper to express thoughts in his own cursive style, and, on the right side, he arranged the figurative composition. He drew symbols that stand for both East and West cultures: the male bodies inspired by ancient Greek sculptures, the Sakyamuni Buddha's feet, the Bible and Jesus with a thorny crown. Painting and calligraphy were used as distinguished art forms, but they were rigorously practised together because they were conceived like inseparable expressive forms.

Although Liu Yonggang masters different art forms and methods, he is not an expert calligrapher whose artistic research is for the aesthetics features of writing practice. He is interested in creating art comprehensive of natural language and depictions, that share the same content in mutual correspondence. In fact, next to the painting he wrote an extemporaneous text concerning "the history of the brilliant civilization of our ancestors"⁷ to introduce the theme of the representation. The use of texts and calligraphy is highly intimate for Liu Yonggang, likely he was writing in a personal diary. He left a trace of his thoughts on the painting, which became a unique art piece with the text.

In the last years, the artist moved toward a graffiti style⁸ preserving the use of words. Among the artworks conceived for the *Noumenon* project, there are several depictions that bear written inscriptions. In some cases, there are vignettes with speech bubbles to give figures voices, like in the painting titled *Shrine* [fig. 5]. The artist adopted the iconography of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* at the Sistine Chapel, with the focus on hands detail, and inserted the sentence "I created you, you sacrifice myself" in English and Chinese. Whereas the project purpose was to provide the author's interpretation of the world in the contemporary age, with its social contradictions and chaos, he used the phrase to elucidate the reading key of the art piece following a praxis, which entails a complementary function of word and picture.

⁷ Interview with the author, Beijing 2019.

⁸ For a study on his stylistic evolution see the exhibition catalogue Liu 2021.

4 Conclusion

During the years, the locution 'iconotext' covered an important role in intermediality studies focused on western literature and art production. The notion iconotext, invented by Nerlich in his publication *Qu'est-ce un iconotexte? Réflexions sur le rapport texte-image photographique dans La Femme se découvre d'Evelyne Sinnassamy*, refers to an art genre in which neither images nor words are free from the other. The way in which this strict bond has been interpreted in the academic debate is capacious, but, among all the sophisticated theories and applications, the Chinese context and the ideographic language was not taken into consideration, even though it may exemplify an even stronger relation and a higher degree of mutual dependence between word and picture. Albeit, in modern Chinese language there is a very sparse number of characters that directly refer to the object representations, and there is no scientific evidence that supports cultural specificity for ideographic reading processes,⁹ the status of Chinese as ideographic language deeply marked the cultural production and its self-representation. Talking about Chinese cultural production, in fact, the academic puzzle on the intermediality can be seen from two angles: painting/calligraphy and character/picture. The former corresponds to what I have defined Eastern paradigm, according to which the three perfections (painting, poetry and calligraphy) are regarded as a unity, but they are distinguished art forms. The latter is more idiosyncratic to the Chinese context, and it does not have a Western counterpart, due to the graphic nature of characters and the pictographic derivation of the Chinese language. This second direction (character/picture) shows that ideograms have been regarded as a system of thought in which visuality is a paramount cultural condition (Yip 1993, 11). Thanks to a certain degree of iconicity, words and pictures may literally be the same entity; this coincidence is well exemplified by the genesis of landscape painting. From the third century BC to the seventh century AD, when landscape painting had not flourished yet as an independent art genre, the depiction of mountains and nature environment followed the ideographic pattern (Fong et al. 1984, 22). Thus, before the codification of theories, the circle of mutual references and influences was already self-accomplished inasmuch the ideogram was influenced by the natural aspect of the object, and, at the same time, artists were inspired by characters counterparts to denote objects in paintings.

⁹ Recent studies devoted to the comparative scrutiny of the VWFA (visual word form area) in French and Chinese speakers found out that the same mechanisms are activated in alphabetic and logographic languages, demonstrating that neural circuits in reading process follow the same pattern, independently from the nature of the language (Nakamura et al. 2012).

The relationship word-picture can be regarded as the common thread of Liu's artistic production: he conceals words behind pictures, converts characters into images, associates phrases with iconographies and matches calligraphy with depictions. In each artwork the artist reinvents this trope, also taking advantage of the status of ideographic language that evokes pictures and creates a mental set to read symbolically. He reshapes the relationship between word and image with cultural self-consciousness, creating artworks in which is impossible to find disregard amid the two elements, which are distinctive but not autonomous. Liliane Louvel evocative definition of iconotext remarks on this feature:

It perfectly illustrates the attempt to merge text and image in a pluriform fusion, as in an oxymoron. The word 'iconotext' conveys the desire to bring together two irreducible objects and form a new object in a fruitful tension in which each object maintains its specificity. It is therefore a perfect word to designate the ambiguous, aporetic, and in-between object of our analysis. (Louvel 2011, 15)

To conclude, Liu Yonggang demonstrates that the interrelation of arts in his works is natural and symbiotic. The idea of a "pluriform fusion" amid word and picture seems tailored to Liu Yonggang's production, whose works combines verbal and visual languages in composite images. Although it is possible to differentiate his production between explicit combination and internal references between pictures and words, the underlying principle is the same: the ongoing oscillation between the two.

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