Deterritorializing Chinese Calligraphy: Wang Dongling and Martin Wehmer's *Visual Dialogue* (2010)

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Upon the nationwide reopening of art academies in the Post-Mao Era of the People's Republic of China (PRC),[1] the field of Chinese calligraphy (*Zhongguo shufa* 中國書法) underwent official renewal as an art form, systematically placing modernization, academization, and internationalization on its agenda.[2]

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1 Following Mao Zedong's 毛澤東 (1893–1976) death and the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Post-Mao Era, approx. 1977–1989, was marked by ideological, economic, and social renewal under Deng Xiaoping's (1904–1997) "Reform and Opening" (*gaige kaifang* 改革開放) policy, which ended with the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on the student-led Democracy Movement. For recent critical discussion of this period, see Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 491–527.

2 On the development of modern Chinese calligraphy as an institutionalized discipline at mainland Chinese art schools beginning in the Post-Mao Era, see the chronological overview provided by Lu Dadong 魯大東, "Zhongguo 'xiandai shufa' dashi nianbiao" 中國'現代書法'大事年表 [Chronology of Significant Events of Chinese "Modern Calligraphy"], in *Zhongguo "xiandai shufa" lunwenji* 中國'現代書法'論文集/ *Florilegium of Theses on "Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy,"* ed. Wang Dongling 王冬齡 (Hangzhou: CAA Press, 2004), 353–373; Gordon S. Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China* (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 162–194; Shao-Lan Hertel, "Lines in Translation: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modernist Calligraphy, Early 1980s–Early 1990s," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 15, no. 4 (2016): 6–28. For general and comprehensive introductions to the history and development of calligraphy in China, its individual script types, techniques, aesthetics, and styles, see Wen C. Fong and Zhongshi Ouyang, *Chinese Calligraphy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Wen C. Fong and Robert E. Harrist, Jr., *The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliot Collection at Princeton* (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1999). For discussions on the changing landscape of Chinese calligraphy as a modern and contemporary period art practice and discourse in the twentieth and

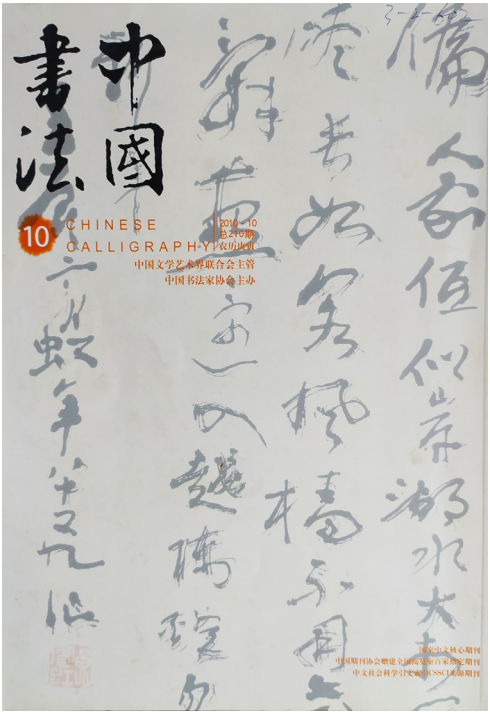

Fig. 1. *Front cover of the leading monthly Mainland Chinese journal* Zhongguo shufa (Chinese Calligraphy)*, est. 1982 by the Chinese Calligraphers Association (Zhongguo Shufajia Xiehui). Image source:* Zhongguo shufa zazhishe.[3]

By promoting new genres of "Chinese modern calligraphy" (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa* 中國現代書法), and subsequently "Chinese contemporary calligraphy" (*Zhongguo dangdai shufa* 中國當代書法), modernist and avant-garde calligraphers have sought to resist and challenge the deeply-entrenched tradition of calligraphy in mainland China as an exclusive elite practice.[4] Since the late 1970s, art practitioners and critics have explored new languages to counter this narrative, contesting the dichotomous conceptions that serve to

twenty-first centuries, see Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*; Junjie Zhou, "Chinese Calligraphy in the Twentieth Century," in Fong and Ouyang, *Chinese Calligraphy*, 379–413.

3 *Zhongguo shufa* 中国书法 10 (2010), accessed March 1, 2021, http://zgsfzz.ckan.cn/.

4 On the elite structures of calligraphy practice in premodern, modern, and contemporary China, and the reciprocal manifestations of social hierarchy, political function, and aesthetic reception, see Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1997]), 135–171; Richard C. Kraus, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Lothar Ledderose, "Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function," *Orientations* 17, no. 10 (1986): 35–50; Yueh-ping Yen, *Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary Chinese Society* (London: Routledge, 2005).

legitimize it, such as traditional versus modern, East versus West, and, specific to calligraphy, written character versus abstract. Efforts to step away from the powerful essentialist rhetoric of discourse built upon the "four written characters" of the phrase "Chinese calligraphy" (*Zhongguo shufa* 中國書法) remain marginal, however.[5] The monopoly of dominant Han-centered discourse continues to find embodiment, for example through core journals such as the leading monthly *Zhongguo shufa* 中國書法 (*Chinese Calligraphy*), established in 1982 by the Chinese Calligraphers Association (Zhongguo Shufajia Xiehui 中國書法家協會) (Fig. 1). These publications reinforce the official narrative, helping to maintain elite control over the practice and reception of calligraphy and strengthen social cohesion among its practitioners and recipients.[6]

Set against this discursive backdrop, I investigate in this paper a 2010 artistic collaboration at the China Academy of Art (CAA; Zhongguo Meishu Xueyuan 中國美術學院),[7] Hangzhou, between calligrapher Wang Dongling 王冬齡 (*1945) (Figs. 2a–b), director of CAA's Chinese Modern Calligraphy Research Center (Zhongguo Xiandai Shufa Yanjiu Zhongxin 中國現代書法研究中心), and German-born conceptual painter Martin Wehmer (*1966) (Figs. 3a–b), invited by the CAA as a guest professor from the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK). I discuss their collaborative project *Visual Dialogue / Shijue*

5 This was recently addressed by André Kneib in the concluding roundtable of "'*Shu, feishu' de shidai jingyu yu wenhua chuancheng xueshu luntan*" '書·非書'的時代境遇與文化傳承學術論壇, officially translated as "The Historical Context and Cultural Heritage of Calligraphy Academic Symposium," held on the occasion of the "2019 *'Shu, feishu' Hangzhou guoji xiandai shufa jie* 書·非書'杭州國際現代書法界 ["Writing/Non-Writing" Hangzhou International Modern Calligraphy Festival] organized by the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, October 12–13, 2019. For Kneib's symposium paper, see *2019 'Shu feishu' Hangzhou guoji xiandai shufa jie (juan er: lunwen)* '書·非書' 杭州國際現代書法界(卷二: 論文) [2019 "Writing/Non-Writing" Hangzhou International Modern Calligraphy Festival (Vol. II: Papers)], ed. Wang Dongling 王冬齡 and Xu Jiang 許江 (Hangzhou: CAA Press, 2020), 156–162. For the catalogue of the group exhibition held on the occasion, see *"Shu feishu" 2019 Hangzhou guoji xiandai shufa jie (juan yi: Zuopin)* "書·非書" 2019 杭州國際現代書法界(卷一: 作品) [2019 "Writing/Non-Writing" Hangzhou International Modern Calligraphy Festival (Vol. I: Works)], ed. Wang Dongling and Xu Jiang (Hangzhou: CAA Press, 2019).

6 The notion of social cohesion in the specific art historical context of Chinese calligraphy is borrowed from Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 33. For counter-narratives against essentialist-exceptionalist discourse in historical contexts of the Chinese brush-and-ink arts of calligraphy and ink painting, see Shao-Lan Hertel, "Of Kowloon's Uncrowned Kings and True Recluses: Commemoration, Trace, and Erasure, and the Shaping of a Hong-Kong-topia from Chen Botao (1855–1930) to Tsang Tsou-choi (1921–2007)," *Art Research Special Issue* 1 (2020): 24–35; Shao-Lan Hertel, "Whither the Methods of the Ancients? Huang Binhong's (1865–1955) Clerical-Scripted Painting as a Response to the 'Harmonious Uniting of Red-and-Green and Ink,'" in *Transcultural Intertwinements in East Asian Art and Culture, 1920s–1950s*, ed. Annegret Bergmann and Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch (Weimar: VDG, 2018), 101–127; Frank Vigneron, "'Ink Art' as Strategy for Hong Kong Institutions," *Journal for Cultural Research* 21, no. 1 (2017): 92–117.

7 Formerly the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (Zhejiang Meishu Xueyuan 浙江美術學院).

duihua 視覺對話, in which they produced an artwork using images and text sequences in painted and written speech bubbles. I will critically address the incentives and conditions of artistic collaborations such as this, undertaken under the official institutional tutelage of intercultural dialogue, as well as their limitations and potentials. Given the diverse linguistic, cultural, and historical backgrounds that inform their respective art practices and conceptual approaches, Wang's and Wehmer's *Visual Dialogue* prompts an epistemological inquiry: How should the transcultural speech bubble be read (literally, visually, and metaphorically)? How has it been filled? What is the content of its dialogue? I argue that it is through its extensive resonances and convergences, and likewise its dissonances and divergences, that the artwork as a collaborative work constitutes meanings of transcultural epistemological significance and art historical value. Furthermore, a reading of *Visual Dialogue*'s semiotic shifts ultimately contributes to a deterritorialization of the field of "Chinese calligraphy."

Fig. 2a. *Wang Dongling during a calligraphy performance at the CAA, Hangzhou, June 2004. On the back wall: a section of Wang's rendering of* Free and Easy Wandering (Xiaoyaoyou) *in cursive script, 2003, Ink on paper, 7000 x 12000 cm. Photo courtesy of Wang Dongling.*

Fig. 2b. *Wang Dongling,* Free and Easy Wandering*, 2015. Triptych of hanging scrolls with chaos-script (*luanshu*) calligraphy. Ink on paper, 365 x 145 cm each scroll. Sanshang Contemporary Art Gallery, Hangzhou.*[8]

8 *Shu feishu: Wang Dongling* 書非書：王冬齡 *Writing / Non-Writing: Wang Dongling,* ed. Sanshang Dangdai Yishuguan 三尚當代藝術館 (Hangzhou: Sanshang Dangdai Yishuguan, 2015), 15.

Fig. 3a. *Martin Wehmer in his Beijing atelier, January 2020. Photo: Angela Li.*

Fig. 3b. *Official poster of the group exhibition* "In China": Ausstellung deutscher Künstler/Zai Zhongguo: Deguo yishujia zuopin zhan*, held at the German Embassy Beijing, November 7–December 7, 2019. Image source: German-China.org.*[9]

This paper builds upon critical contemporary discourses on Chinese art and art history, and draws from transcultural and postcolonial theory, semiotics, picture theory, comics studies, and translation studies. It is divided into five sections. The first section provides an introduction to Chinese modern and contemporary calligraphy through the critical art historical and geographical discourses prevalent in the PRC since the late 1970s. Section two presents an

9 "Ausstellung von deutschen Künstlern in China eröffnet," *Germany-China*, November 7, 2019, accessed February 28, 2021, http://german.china.org.cn/txt/2019-11/07/content_75385480.htm.

analysis of *Visual Dialogue*. I discuss the multiple textual, imagerial, scriptural, and pictorial elements of the work, which demonstrate its transcultural significance and polyvalent nature; and I also consider its status as a cross-cultural institutional collaboration. Section three explores epistemological issues related to aspects of the artwork's form and function, as conditioned by culturally specific aesthetics and semiotic systems. A translational perspective highlights the artwork's productive processes of cultural translation, while a picture-theory perspective reveals its complex metapictorial dimension, ultimately arguing that *Visual Dialogue* necessitates a transsemiotic reading. Section four further draws from comics studies to assess the artwork in its metafictionality, focusing on intertextual aspects of the work, and related characteristics of sequentiality, narrativity, and aesthetic reception. I read *Visual Dialogue* as a metacomic, considering the material conditions of the work in order to identify culturally specific differences and resonances, thus further illuminating the way the artwork functions as a transcultural prism. Section five readdresses the historical conditions surrounding mainland Chinese art institutions in the Post-Mao Era, considering the CAA's locale in its interstitial significance as a Third Space. This Third Space facilitated Wang's and Wehmer's artistic encounter, emphasizing the polyphonic nature of the project and its relevance in writing global art history. Overall, I argue that the nascent epistemological shifts that are exposed and negotiated in the artwork prompt us to dismantle premises and expectations that form the basis of prevalent essentialist-exceptionalist discourse. By questioning the feasibility and sustainability of "Chinese calligraphy" (*Zhongguo shufa*) as a concept in light of today's global contexts of contemporary art discourse, I seek to contribute to a deterritorialization of Chinese calligraphy and its discursive field.

I. Re-claiming the territory of Chinese calligraphy

Chinese modern and contemporary calligraphy need to be comprehended as interlaced, multi-layered structures and practices constituted through converging, diverging, and overlapping interests and suppositions, and embroiled in diverse and varied discourses, including aspects of transculturality. Since the 1970s, the CAA in Hangzhou has played a vital role in producing new, critical discourse, which officially aimed to depoliticize and "purify" the field of calligraphy as an art in the wake of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Reform and Opening policies.[10] With its Chinese Modern Calligraphy

10 As Barrass states: "The exponents of Modernism believed that calligraphy would never become a means of creative expression in modern China unless it broke free from the rigorous rules that had constrained it for centuries. Modernist calligraphy, they argued, should unashamedly proclaim itself a fine art." Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*, 29. On the endeavors to depoliticize and "purify" the arts in Post-Mao contexts, see *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 99–

Research Center established in 2002, which is one of a kind worldwide, the CAA continues to be keenly engaged in the promotion of contemporary and experimental forms of calligraphy practice.[11] The founder and head of the research center, internationally renowned calligraphy artist Wang Dongling, has been a pioneer of these endeavors and has significantly shaped the CAA's structure and profile. While much has been written on Wang, the transcultural aspect of his work still offers unexplored paths of inquiry.[12]

Visual Dialogue, which has so far not been discussed in academic publications,[13] serves as an ideal case study through which to reconsider Chinese calligraphy through plural perspectives. By adopting various viewpoints opened up, for example, by picture theory, translation studies, and comics studies, the transcultural significance of Wang's and Wehmer's artistic collaboration can be brought to the fore. This helps to challenge the predominant discourse that John Clark has identified in terms of "national hermeneutics" based on "historical refusal,"[14] and the bifurcated interpretation of supposed "endogenous" forms of Chinese art through an "expulsive and reductive negation of the exogenous, at which slow dusk the blinds are drawn over many art historical phenomena."[15]

103; Yan Zhou, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1949–Present* (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 85–116.

11 For a chronology of the research center's institutional history, see Lu, "Zhongguo 'xiandai shufa,'" 353–373.

12 For Wang's biography and exhibition history, see Shao-Lan Hertel, "Wang Dongling," in *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon (AKL): Die Bildenden Künstler aller Zeiten und Völker*, ed. Andreas Beyer, Bénédicte Savoy, and Wolf Tegethoff (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming). For a detailed discussion of Wang's work over the past four decades and Chinese and Western language publications on Wang's work, see Shao-Lan Hertel, "The Inner Workings of Brush-and-Ink: A Study on Huang Binhong 黃賓虹 (1865–1955) as Calligrapher, with Special Respect to the Concept of Interior Beauty (*neimei* 內美)" (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2017), 257–305.

13 There does exist a documentary report of the project by CAA's Tang Kaizhi 唐楷之, "Wang Dongling VS Mading Weimo" 王冬齡VS馬丁·威默 [Wang Dongling VS Martin Wehmer], *Meishu bao* 美術報 (*China Art Weekly*), no. 884/56 (October 2010), 49. See also a discussion of the collaborative project transcribed in the proceedings of the aforementioned CAA symposium: Shao-Lan Hertel, "Cong kuawenhua duihuakuang du 'Zhongguo dangdai shufa': Wang Dongling yu Mading Weimoer de hezuo zuopin 'Shijue duihua' (2010)*"* 從跨文化對話框讀'中國當代書法'：王冬齡與馬丁·韋默爾的合作作品《視覺對話》(2010) [Reading "Chinese Contemporary Calligraphy" through a Transcultural Speech Bubble: Wang Dongling and Martin Wehmer's Collaborative Work *Visual Dialogue* (2010)], in *'Shu feishu' Hangzhou guoji xiandai shufa jie (juan er)*, 156–162.

14 See John Clark, "Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art: Main Issues," in *Negotiating Difference: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, ed. Birgit Hopfener, Franziska Koch, Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch, and Juliane Noth (Weimar: VDG, 2012), 33–47; 34.

15 Clark, "Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art," 42. While Clark establishes the terminology of *national hermeneutics* in the context of Chinese *guohua* 國畫 (national painting) discourse as particularly

Indeed, an essential question faced by contemporary historians of Chinese art in (re)writing art history is addressed by Gao Shiming: "In terms of the cultural issues of contemporary China, is the key to the 'reassignment of the subject' about China or from China?"[16] In other words, should art history focus on art *about* China, or art *from* China (or, indeed, art *in* China)?[17] Gao proposes that the established term "Chinese contemporary art" needs to be reconsidered. He suggests the reversed term "contemporary Chinese art," as "from this angle, we may find that 'contemporary Chinese art' is actually more meaningful than 'Chinese contemporary art' as well as more plural and complex."[18] Likewise, I propose that the customary Chinese term "Chinese contemporary calligraphy" (*Zhongguo dangdai shufa* 中國當代書法) should be reversed to "contemporary Chinese calligraphy" (*dangdai Zhongguo shufa* 當代中國書法). The revised term accentuates contemporaneity over Chineseness, makes space for plurality, and points towards a larger global discourse on art. This global discourse emphasizes processes of cultural negotiation and translation and opens a dialogue between the exogenous and endogenous. Advocates of this approach believe in the multiplication of concepts "in every possible direction," as put forward by Frank Vigneron:

> Ideally, and if art history is truly a way to disseminate a rich but practical understanding of all types of art of individuals into all types of culture, translation should be like a food processor with the lid open, multiplying concepts and their approximations in every possible direction: deterritorialization on an epic scale.[19]

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prevalent since the 1970s, this terminology is likewise fit to describe the exceptionalist art-historiographical narrative common in mainland Chinese calligraphy discourse. This Sinocentric narrative can be seen in Clark's terms "exogenous" and "endogenous," understood as "notions of causation either external or internal to nationally defined art worlds." John Clark, "Is the Modernity of Chinese Art Comparable? An Opening of a Theoretical Space," *Journal of Art Historiography* 10 (June 2014): 1–27; 3.

16 Shiming Gao, "The Dismantling and Re-Construction of Bentu ('This Land' or 'Native Land'): Contemporary Chinese Art in the Post-Colonial Context," in *A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China: Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Jörg Huber and Zhao Chuan (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 103–120; 117.

17 Here referencing Craig Clunas's book, which is "very deliberately called *Art in China*, and not *Chinese Art*, because it is written out of a distrust of the existence of any unifying principles or essences linking such a wide range of made things, having very different dates, very different materials, and very different makers, audiences, and contexts of use," such that "the question 'What is art in China?' could really be rephrased as 'What has historically been called art in China, by whom and when?'" Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

18 As Gao explains, "Contemporary Chinese art is 'plural,' and this 'plurality' is not the rigid and hollow 'hybridity' nor is it the kind of 'multi-culturalism' that has become part of the publicity strategy. China's plurality keeps its inner tension." Gao, "The Dismantling and Re-Construction of Bentu ('This Land' or 'Native Land')," 118.

19 Frank Vigneron, "Damned if You Do; Damned if You Don't," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed.

Resonating with this understanding of art history and informed by postcolonial theory, Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru have argued in favor of "artwork as a strategy," indicating an artistic and cultural technique of identity (de) construction and means for survival emerging through the in-between condition of the "third space."[20] Hou points out, "The third space is replacing a concept of identity based on the traditional opposition between East and West,"[21] and Gao argues, "The challenge is how to reorient western expectations of the oriental toward the unexpected."[22]

Seconding these observations, in his critical discussion of the historiographical challenges posed by "the work of the critical interpreter of contemporary Chinese art, as well as of the transnational cultural networks that support its production, display, and reception (whether Chinese or non-Chinese)," Paul Gladston identifies a "highly problematic paradox."[23] On the one hand, he writes, there is a "danger of entering into unjustifiably orientalizing or essentialist views of the significance of contemporary Chinese art and therefore of overemphasizing its cultural separateness from other forms of contemporary art," and, on the other, there is a "risk of overlooking the persistence of tradition as part of the critically resistant construction of a modern Chinese cultural identity" by "downplaying the 'Chineseness' of

James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2006), 322–341; 332. My use of the term *deterritorialization* in this text references the terminology deployed in Vigneron's essay on issues of writing world art history taking into consideration contexts of Chinese art. Initially coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *déterritorialization* indicates a complex dynamic process of departure from the center of a given discursive territory or system (ideological, social, political, linguistic, etc.) to its periphery, whereby "the movement of deterritorialisation can never be grasped in itself, one can only grasp its indices in relation to the territorial representations." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004 [1972]), 347.

20 Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 183–189; 184. As coined in postcolonial theory by Homi Bhabha, the third space indicates the "productive capacities" of cultural difference emerging in the "*in-between* space" of encounter, a "split-space of enunciation" opening up "alien territory" on the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation," whose moments of displacement and alterity generate a (re)negotiation of cultural identity, meaning, and representation. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004 [1994]), 56.

21 Gao and Hou, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space," 184.

22 Gao and Hou, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space," 185.

23 Paul Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition: Towards a Critique of International and Indigenous Perspectives on the Significance of Contemporary Chinese Art," *Tate Papers* 21 (2014) (no pagination), accessed December 26, 2020, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/21/somewhere-and-nowhere-between-modernity-and-tradition-towards-a-critique-of-international-and-indigenous-perspectives-on-the-significance-of-contemporary-chinese-art.

contemporary Chinese art."[24] Gladston tackles this paradox by building on intercultural philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer's concept of *Polylog*,[25] to propose a "dialogue of many."[26] Gladston thus advocates "the use of polylogues—that is to say, inter-textual multi-voiced discourses—as a means of opening up differing interpretative perspectives on contemporary Chinese art to one another while at the same time internally dividing and questioning their individual authorities."[27]

In his monograph *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili*, Gladston further suggests that

> resulting from the relay/network of transcultural appropriations-translations and resonances that have constituted the differing critical aesthetics of neo-Confucianism and post-Enlightenment modernity are sustained negative productivities of meaning that render each ineluctably polyvalent in its significances and impact with regard to the other.[28]

Wang's and Wehmer's collaboration can be considered an example of such transcultural appropriation-translations. To borrow Gladston's terminology, the emergent "negative productivities of meaning" of this collaboration, grounded in "differing critical aesthetics,"[29] render each side of the collaboration "ineluctably polyvalent in its significances and impact."[30] Following Gladston's appeal to draw attention "to a more complexly diversified global landscape of … negative-productive transcultural relationships,"[31] I hope that this case study can add a stimulating perspective to ongoing scholarship within this global landscape.

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24 Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition."

25 On the use of this concept with regard to the propositions and conditions of intercultural philosophy, see Franz Martin Wimmer, "Thesen, Bedingungen und Aufgaben einer interkulturell orientierten Philosophie," *Polylog: Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* 1 (1998): 5–12.

26 Franz Martin Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie: Eine Einführung* (Vienna: Facultas 2004), quoted in Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition."

27 Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition."

28 Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili: Towards a Critical Contemporaneity* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2019), 5.

29 Indicating deconstructive semiotic shifts grounded in the artwork's condition of *différance* in the poststructuralist sense, as elucidated by Gladston: "*Différance* is a neologism coined by the French theorist Jacques Derrida to signify his view that linguistic signification is made possible by a persistent deconstructive (negative-productive) movement of differing-deferring between signs." Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition."

30 Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili,* 5.

31 Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili,* 5.

Fig. 4a. *Wang Dongling and Martin Wehmer,* Visual Dialogue *(left half), 2010. Painting and calligraphy, acrylic colors and Chinese ink on Xuan paper. Total dimension of work: 220 x 32000 cm. Photo courtesy of CAA.*

Fig. 4b. *Wang Dongling and Martin Wehmer,* Visual Dialogue *(right half). Photo courtesy of CAA.*

II. A harmonious symbiosis "Beyond East and West"?

Upon its completion in October 2010, Wang's and Wehmer's collaborative work *Visual Dialogue* (Figs. 4a–b) was exhibited at the Mingyuan Art Museum (MYAM, Mingyuan Meishuguan 明圓美術館), Shanghai.[32] The creation of this project took place in two phases over several days. In the first phase, Wehmer prepared a large surface of connected Chinese *Xuan* 宣 paper sheets measuring 2.2 meters in height and 32 meters in total length. He used acrylics to paint rectangular speech bubbles of various sizes onto the paper sheets (Fig. 5). Some of the speech bubbles contain minimalistic graphic elements such as lines, crosses, and arrows, all drawn precisely with a ruler.[33] In Wehmer's words, the

32 The exhibition period was from October 18–24, 2010. See the exhibition report by Jie Wang, "Art Institutes Opening up to European Ideas," *Shanghai Daily*, October 27, 2010, accessed December 26, 2020, https://archive.shine.cn/feature/art-and-culture/Art-institutes-opening-up-to-European-ideas/shdaily.shtml.

33 For more on Wehmer's biography and work, see the following websites of galleries that represent Wehmer's artworks: "Martin Wehmer," *Contemporary by Angela Li,* accessed February 24, 2021, http://cbal.com.hk/art/artists/martin-wehmer/; "Martin Wehmer," *Galerie Anja Knoess*, accessed

speech bubbles were described as "empty pictures" (*Leerbilder*), respectively "picture-in-picture" (*Bild-in-Bild*) compositions. In the second phase of the creative process, Wang filled these speech bubbles with forms typically seen in his oeuvre, such as references to classical Chinese texts written in various types and styles of calligraphic script.[34] These were written out on the floor in sections and then hung on the wall; see, for example, the image in Fig. 4a depicting the left-hand side of the work. Read from left to right, this side of the artwork contains renderings of the following works: *Two Chan-Buddhist Poems* (*Chan shi er shou* 禪詩二首) by the Tang dynasty (618–907) monk-poet Jiaoran 皎然 (ca. 730–799) in regular script (*kaishu* 楷書);[35] the complete *Heart Sutra* (*Xin jing* 心經) in cursive script (*caoshu* 草書);[36] the single written character *wu* 無 in seal-script (*zhuanshu* 篆書), signifying the Daoist concept of "nothingness," "nothing," or "without"; and an excerpt of the *Bodhi Verse* (*Puti ji* 菩提偈) ascribed to the sixth Chan-Buddhist patriarch, Huineng 慧能 (ca. 638–713) of the Tang dynasty, in clerical script (*lishu* 隸書).[37] The entire right-hand side of the work, seen in Fig. 4b, depicts Wang's "abstract" (*chouxiang* 抽象), "non-

February 24, 2021, https://www.galerieanjaknoess.de/artists-1/martin-wehmer/; "马丁·韦默尔" (Martin Wehmer), *Pékin Fine Arts,* accessed February 24, 2021, https://pekinfinearts.com/zh/artist/martin-wehmer/.

34 For comprehensive introductions to the various script types, techniques, and styles established in the history of Chinese calligraphy, see Fong and Ouyang, *Chinese Calligraphy*; Fong and Harrist, *The Embodied Image*.

35 Mary Anne Cartelli translates the first poem, "Written in the Thatched Hut on the Lake" (*Ti hushang caotang* 題湖上草堂), as follows: "One need not seek reclusion in the mountains of India / Above the lake there are thousands of peaks for one's leisure. / Fragrant plants and white clouds keep me living here, / Men of the world, to what affairs are you connected?" Mary Anne Cartelli, *The Five-Colored Clouds of Mount Wutai: Poems from Dunhuang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 22. Charles Egan translates the second poem, "Instructing Mahāyāna Monks in My Cell South of The Lake" (*Hunan lanre shi Dasheng zhugong* 湖南蘭若示大乘諸公), as follows: "The *nirvāṇa* shore I haven't found, / for vain love of a boat unbound. / Thoughts that East Mound clouds convey, / at year's end: still far, far away." Charles Egan, *Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen Monks of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 77.

36 Also known as *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* (*Bore boluomiduo xin jing* 般若波羅蜜多心經; Skt. *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*) T251, the 268 characters of which constitute a Buddhist scripture traditionally regarded as translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 602–664). For an English-language translation of the sutra, see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sūtra* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), vii–viii.

37 "The *bodhi* is fundamentally without a tree, / as is the bright mirror without a stand. / Fundamentally, not a thing exists, / where then could dust alight?" (菩提本無樹 / 明鏡亦非臺 / 本來無一物 / 何處惹塵埃; author's own translation). The *locus classicus* of this verse is the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* 六祖大師法寶壇經, T2008 (XLVIII) 349a7–8. For a translation of an earlier Dunhuang variant of the verse, see Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-Huang Manuscript with Translation, Introduction and Notes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 132 and n. 38.

writing" (*feishu* 非書), or "no-character" (*wuzi* 無字) calligraphy. Wang titled this section of the work "Bach Fugue" (*Bahe fuge* 巴赫·賦格), referencing the classical musical form associated with the German Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750).[38]

Seen from Wehmer's perspective, the speech bubble deployed as a visual/textual element in *Visual Dialogue* reflects a recurring motif that was established in his painting at that time.[39] As he explains:

Fig. 5. *Martin Wehmer painting speech bubbles for* Visual Dialogue. *Photo courtesy of CAA.*

38 For recent discussion of Wang's abstract calligraphy in art historical context, see Tsongzung Johnson Chang (with English trans. by Jude Anthony Keeler), "*Miandui 'feishu' de shuxie*" 面對'非書'的書寫 [Writing towards "Non-Writing"], in Wang and Xu, '*Shu feishu*,' 62–69; Frank Vigneron, "From Antiquarianism to Chaos Script," in Wang and Xu, '*Shu feishu*,' 118–130.

39 See Figs. 8a–c, which show the empty speech bubble as a repeating visual element in Wehmer's paintings. Further see Christoph Kivelitz, *Martin Wehmer. 0FIGUR: Ausstellungskatalog des Dortmunder Kunstverein und des Morat-Institut für Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft* (Freiburg: Dortmunder Kunstverein, 2007), 2–11.

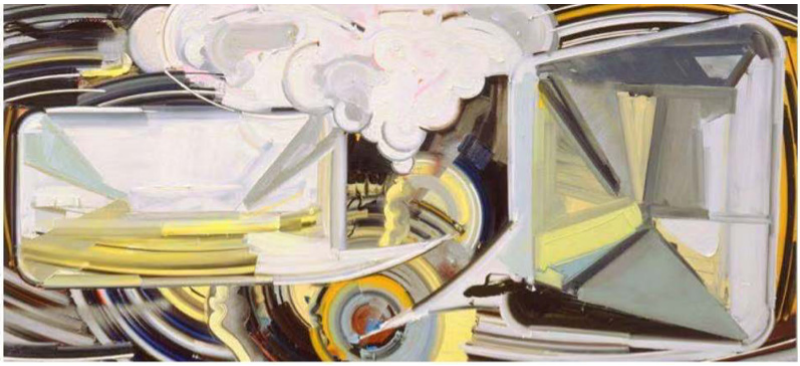

Fig. 6a. *Martin Wehmer,* LOKOBla, Series 0figur*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 190 x 420 cm. Image courtesy of Martin Wehmer.*

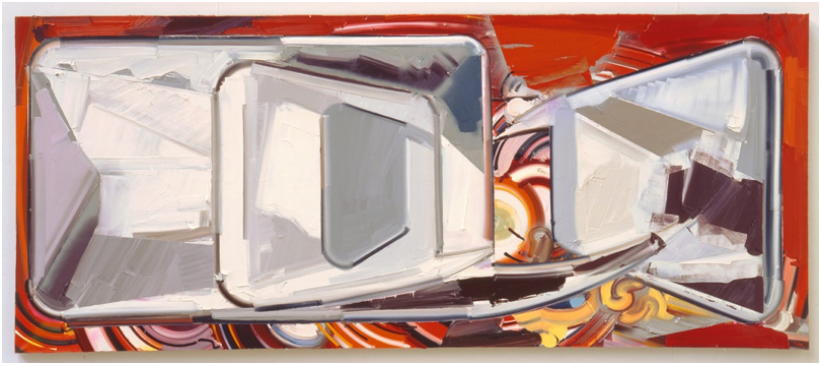

Fig. 6b. *Martin Wehmer,* BLA, Series 0figur, *2006. Oil on canvas, 140 x 350 cm. Image courtesy of Martin Wehmer.*

Fig. 6c. *Martin Wehmer,* Wumme, Series 0figur*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 170 x 410 cm. Image courtesy of Martin Wehmer.*

> The speech bubbles … [are like] windows … a rectangular-shaped pictorial element, often with rounded corners and conceived with a directional arrow, which as an abstraction is understood worldwide as a symbol for something said (or, when conceived in cloud-shape, for something thought); a frame-like element, a free spatial field in which to write or paint. In my painting of around 2006 it appeared as an encapsulated element, where I sometimes painted picture-in-picture-in-picture-in-picture, similar to the Russian doll.[40]

Wehmer also mentions "a possibly emerging aesthetics of 'Windows windows,'" referencing the generic function of the Microsoft Windows operating system, insofar as those browser-like windows, "in which further windows could be opened up," conveyed a similar effect to that of the Matryoshka, or Russian dolls.[41] Whether Russian dolls or Microsoft Windows, such globally recognized icons are readily recalled: associating a type of container whose function conveys form and content alike; moreover, a type of container with (in theory) infinite self-reproductive capabilities.

In terms of the traditional conventions and practices of calligraphy and painting in Chinese art, it is worthwhile to examine *Visual Dialogue's* "fine print," as I call it, which indicates the information provided in a given work through inscribed signatures, colophons, labels, and seals of individual producers, patrons, donors, or collectors.[42] *Visual Dialogue* contains two columns of written characters rendered in informal semi-cursive script (*xingshu* 行書) to the left of the enlarged single seal-script character "nothingness." Easily overlooked given their small-lettered size (hence their metaphorical designation as fine print), these columns in fact contain a personal statement from Wang (Fig. 7). His inscription, sealing the work with an imprint of his intentions, reads: "Beyond East and West, beyond old and new; beyond writing and painting, this is done beyond intentions."[43] Wang's statement provides a key to deciphering this collaborative work. His universalist claim to transcend the divisions and limitations imposed by categories such as geographical borders between cultures, historical concepts of tradition and modernity, or semiotic systems of text/script and image/picture can be read as a reconciliatory gesture,

40 Martin Wehmer, WeChat message to author, October 31, 2019.

41 Martin Wehmer, WeChat message to author, October 31, 2019.

42 On the notion of "fine print" as an art historical phenomenon in the context of Chinese calligraphy, see Shao-Lan Hertel, "Creating Academic-Museal Dialogue In-Between Ivory Towers and Unwritten Pages: Tsinghua University Art Museum (TAM) and Its Collection of Chinese Contemporary Calligraphy," *Cahiers d'Histoire* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 93–137; 120–127.

43 Wang's original wording is: *Wu dong wu xi, wu gu wu jin, wu shu wu hua, wuyi wei zhi* 無東無西, 無古無今, 無書無畫, 無意為之.

given the linguistic and cultural differences between himself and Wehmer, alongside the diversity of their artistic approach. In another sense, Wang's "politically correct" message can be considered to resonate with the initial motivation and institutional context of their officially assigned collaboration.[44]

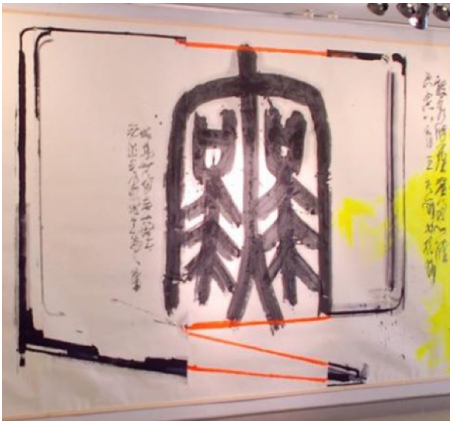

Fig. 7. *Detail of* Visual Dialogue *showing one of Wehmer's speech bubbles filled with Wang's seal-script rendering of the single written character "nothingness" (*wu*), and Wang's two-line inscription rendered in semi-cursive script to the left of the character. Photo: Shao-Lan Hertel.*

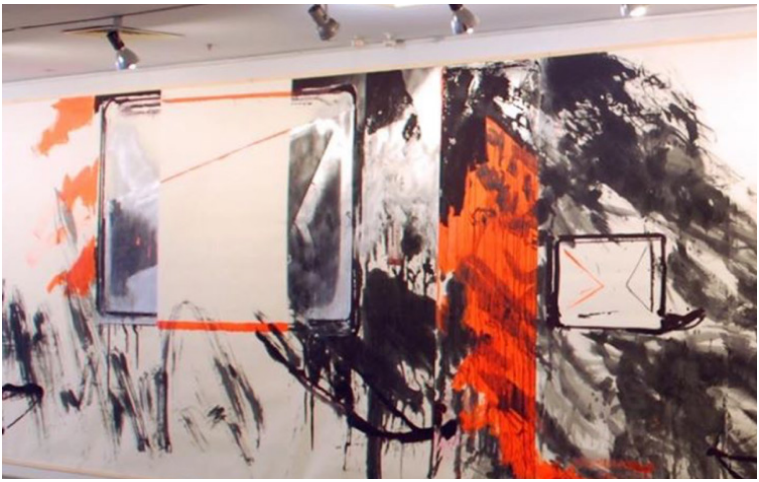

Fig. 8. *Detail of* Visual Dialogue *showing two of Wehmer's speech bubbles left "unfilled" by Wang. Photo: Shao-Lan Hertel.*

44 Within the institutional cooperative framework of CAA and UdK's Chinesisch-Deutsche Kunstakademie (CDK, Zhong-De Xueyuan 中德學院), Wang and Wehmer were one of the five collaborations realized under the title *Visual Dialogue: Workshop between Chinese and European Artists*, specially conceived on the occasion of, and in collaboration with, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, as a series of intercultural, interdisciplinary projects of paired artist-duos. Displayed together at the Mingyuan Art Museum in Shanghai, they co-constituted the events undertaken within the larger Expo-wide framework of *The 3rd European-Chinese Cultural Dialogue*.

Notably, there are two small speech bubbles drawn by Wehmer—again, easily overseen given the scale of the overall work—that Wang has left blank (Fig. 8). Supposing that this was not done by accident, we may ask: Do these blank speech bubbles indicate an aesthetic choice born out of the many years of art practice with brush and ink—adhering to the aesthetic formula of "using the white to serve as the black" (*ji bai dang hei* 計白當黑)?[45] Do they function as a reference to Wehmer's own oeuvre of paintings? Or, perhaps they could be interpreted, in a classical Chinese philosophical sense, as manifestations of "nonaction," "inaction," or "effortless action" (*wuwei* 無為)?[46] Considering the evolution of Wang's oeuvre over the past fifty years, an integrative interpretation combining all of the above aspects (and possibly more) seems preferable, given that his works generally demonstrate a consolidative approach aimed at harmonizing differences. Numerous examples, including *Visual Dialogue*, illustrate Wang's interest in syncretizing multiple philosophies and schools of thought as well as artistic techniques and styles. A particularly vivid example is his triptych "Confucianism—Daoism—Buddhism" (*Ru-Dao-Fo lianping* 儒道佛聯屏) (Fig. 9), which conveys a reconciliation of varying cultural and historical belief systems as well as textual and artistic traditions. Wang's syncretistic aesthetic preference for the "harmonious cosmological,"[47] and the particular significance here of Daoist principles and ideals, is already most evident in this early work of 1987. The way that Daoist concepts inform Wang's artistic practice is also seen in his conceptualized rendering of the seal-script character *wu* (nothingness), which is seen enlarged not only in

45 As put forward by the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) seal carver and calligrapher Deng Shiru 鄧石如 (ca. 1739/1743–1805), "using the white to serve as the black" conveys the idea established in Chinese calligraphy discourse that in handling the chisel to carve a seal, or the brush to write calligraphy, attention should be directed towards the uncarved or unwritten "white" spaces as constitutive spatial elements on the stone or paper surface. See Bao Shichen 包世臣, "Yi zhou shuang ji" 藝舟雙楫 [Two Oars in the Boat of Art], rpt. *Ming Qing shuhua lunji (xia)* 明清書畫論集 (下) [Collected Ming- and Qing-Period Treatises on Calligraphy and Painting (Vol. 2)], ed. Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe 上海辭書出版社 (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 2011), 1081–1110, 1082.

46 Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 188–211; Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

47 Here borrowing from Gladston, who has defined the larger phenomenon of Neo-Confucian Syncretism in the context of contemporary Chinese art as "an upholding of the traces of a syncretic, Daoist and Buddhist inflected, Confucian aesthetics whose underlying principles and ideals are traditional to Chinese cultural contexts," which is characterized by a "leaning towards harmonious cosmological non-rationalist reciprocity rather than rigid binary opposition; as symbolized by the Daoist pairing of *yin-yang*." Raffaele Quattrone, "Interview with Paul Gladston: Contemporary Chinese Art and Contemporaneity," *Wall Street International*, May 30, 2020, accessed December 26, 2020, https://wsimag.com/art/62216-interview-with-paul-gladston; Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili,* 1–9, 43–57.

Visual Dialogue but also in the triptych.[48] This represents a recurring icon across his oeuvre, epitomized in his 2000 work *The Void* (*Wu*) now kept in the British Museum (Fig. 10). The museum's conceptual-figurative translation of *Wu* as "The Void" only emphasizes Wang's particular closeness to Daoist philosophy.[49]

Fig. 9. *Wang Dongling,* Confucianism—Daoism—Buddhism*, 1987. Triptych of hanging scrolls with assembled calligraphies rendered in various script types. Ink on paper, overall dimensions, 265 x 208 cm. Image courtesy of Wang Dongling.*

Fig. 10. *Wang Dongling,* The Void (Wu)*, 2000. Seal-script rendering of the single written character "nothingness" (*wu*) with cursive script rendering of the first two chapters of the* Daodejing*. Ink on paper, 272 x 142.5 cm. Image by British Museum.*[50]

48 Here, the third section of the triptych's central scroll is inscribed in white on blue ground with the word *wuwei*, signifying "nonaction," "inaction," or "effortless action," as discussed above. See again Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, 188–211; Slingerland, *Effortless Action*.

49 See also Gordon S. Barrass, "Brushes with Surprise: The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China," *The British Museum*, 2002, accessed December 26, 2020, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2001-0203-0-1.

50 Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*, 170.

As noted at the outset, Gladston's discussion of the polylogue is useful to my inquiry into Wang's and Wehmer's *Visual Dialogue.* Discernible "transcultural appropriations-translations and resonances" and "differing critical aesthetics" are revealed in *Visual Dialogue*, of culturally specific artistic practices and traditions (informed, here, by Chinese brush-and-ink and modern Western visual arts respectively), which engender semiotic shifts that constitute the collaborative artwork in its "negative productivities of meaning."[51] It is the very aspect of dynamic reciprocity (rather than concepts of telic linearity) that essentially informs Gladston's idea of polylogue, which in turn builds upon Wimmer's notion of *Polylog*. As Wimmer put forward in the inaugural issue of *Polylog* with regard to the propositions and conditions of intercultural philosophy as a discipline, one crucial task is "developing an open hermeneutics carried by reciprocal interest."[52] This hermeneutics "is by no means unproblematic. If I want to 'grasp' a foreign way of thinking, I will in any case 'seize' it, and attempt to 'appropriate' it. This can remain a one-way road; it can however also lead to an encounter."[53] As further considered in the following section, I argue that the transcultural appropriation-translations of Wang and Wehmer's polylogue, including their resonances and dissonances, imply meaningful shifts brought about through "encounter," indicating a dynamic "open hermeneutics" (rather than a deconstructive, "persistent disjunctive deferral of meaning")[54].

III. *Visual Dialogue* and its (trans)semiotic shifts

The meaning shifts emergent in *Visual Dialogue* can be elucidated by taking on a picture-theoretical perspective. Such an approach allows us to consider the work not only in terms of language-based texts or metatexts, but as a process of

51 Here again referencing Gladston's terminology, Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili,* 5. Rather than resorting to deconstructivist postmodernist thought alone, Gladston proposes a connection of the Derridean concept of *différance* with the classical Daoist concept of *yin-yang*. This is particularly useful in interpreting *Visual Dialogue*'s aesthetics of symbiosis inasmuch as "Derridean deconstruction looks towards a persistent disjunctive deferral of meaning, while *yin-yang* is conventionally understood within a Chinese cultural context to support the desirable possibility of reciprocation between opposites." See Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition."

52 "… eine offene Hermeneutik zu entwickeln, die von gegenseitigem Interesse ist." Wimmer, "Thesen, Bedingungen und Aufgaben einer interkulturell orientierten Philosophie," 11–12.

53 "Die 'hermeneutische' Aufgabe ist dabei keineswegs unproblematisch. Will ich eine mir fremde Denkweise 'begreifen,' so werde ich sie jedenfalls 'ergreifen,' werde sie mir 'anzueignen' versuchen. Das kann eine Einbahnstraße bleiben; es kann aber auch zu einer Begegnung führen." Wimmer, "Thesen, Bedingungen und Aufgaben einer interkulturell orientierten Philosophie," 12.

54 Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition."

image-based signification. W. J. T. Mitchell has set out the following definition of the "pictorial turn" in his *Picture Theory*:

> Whatever the pictorial turn is … it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics or pictorial "presence": it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality.[55]

Following this definition, I shall focus on the graphic element of the speech bubble as the perhaps most distinct visual feature of *Visual Dialogue.* Not only does the speech bubble make tangible the artwork's transcultural dimension and semiotic condition; it facilitates a reading of the artwork that transcends conventional text-image or script-picture divisions, revealing the intertwined, indeed *indivisible* aspect of *Visual Dialogue*'s textual and pictorial elements.

The speech bubble, a prototypical element of comic books, is an iconic, globally recognizable visual signifier.[56] In *Visual Dialogue*, the speech bubble acquires new and unfamiliar meanings. Though Wang fills most of the speech bubbles with textual content and so they largely retain their original text-box function, the illustrations that conventionally accompany such text boxes (as seen in comic books) are missing. As noted in the previous section, some of *Visual Dialogue*'s speech bubbles have been left empty, which is not commonly seen in comic books. These unfilled speech bubbles supersede their usual function of speech and become meaningful as signified content in and of themselves.

Another striking feature of *Visual Dialogue* is its odd, apparently dissonant mix of modern, popular visual culture on the one hand, and classical Chinese literati (*wenren* 文人) practices on the other. This is most clearly seen in the form of flashy, neon-lined speech bubbles that accommodate quotes from classical Chinese literary texts, rendered in the traditional materials of Chinese brush and ink. In spite of this somewhat alienating combination, it is noteworthy, with reference to culturally specific aesthetic considerations, that Wang does make use of the speech bubbles in a productive (in Gladston's sense, negative-productive) manner. The outlines of the speech bubbles serve as visual frames and borders to accommodate the individual compositions of his text excerpts—not only semantically, but also aesthetically. This is true inasmuch as in Chinese calligraphy, each written character is preconceived within an

55 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

56 M. Thomas Inge, "Origins of Early Comics and Proto-Comics," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin (New York: Routledge, 2017), 9–15; 10.

imaginary square and grid, arranged proportionately according to the given character's specific number of strokes, type of strokes, and script type.[57] The speech bubbles provide a formal reference frame through which the written words contained within can be evaluated as visual products of calligraphic art. This conveys the double nature of the written word, as both signifier and signified. The viewer is thus able to ask: How did the calligrapher go about delineating and economizing space in this speech bubble? How convincingly was its space preconceived and tackled, or appropriated by the calligrapher, in terms of dimensions, graphic shape, proportions, etc.?

Wehmer's designation of the speech bubbles, as quoted above, in terms of "windows," or "picture-in-picture-in-picture-in-picture" compositions, in turn bestows upon the speech bubble a visual metaphor and painterly terminology, indicating a de-emphasis of text and a re-emphasis as image. This shifting interplay between text and image naturally resonates with the originally pictorial nature of written Chinese scripts and characters.[58] The notion of Chinese written characters as icons in the Peircean semiotic sense,[59] that is, image-signs, conceived moreover in terms of (drawn) pictures (*tu* 圖)

57 *Visual Dialogue*'s second-left speech bubble containing the enlarged seal-script character *wu* illustrates this: the acute symmetry of the character's build and even width of individual strokes—typical traits of Chinese seal script—were well calculated and aligned by Wang. Analogously, written texts as a whole are likewise preconceived in an imaginary grid, segmenting the writing surface into vertical and (quasi) horizontal columns to lodge the individual characters. This can be seen in *Visual Dialogue*'s far-left speech bubble, apparently containing a further speech bubble, where Wang accurately calculated the total of fifty-six regular-script characters comprised by Jiaoran's two poems (with stanzas of seven-syllable quatrains each), arranging these within the (awkwardly) shaped space of the outside bubble/frame, and around the borders of the inside bubble/frame. Noteworthy, then, is Wang's abstract calligraphy in the artwork's right-hand half. Conceived as a single, integral composition, and not confined to the frames delineated by the speech bubbles, it transgresses the writing space's imposed borders, suggesting that the language of abstract, or non-writing calligraphy transgresses the dimension of written and spoken words. For further reading on structural composition in Chinese calligraphy, see Fong and Ouyang, *Chinese Calligraphy*, 47–65; Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9–23.

58 Only a small percentage of all characters in use today can be categorized as pictograms proper, nonetheless, pictograms are traditionally seen as forming the basis of the Chinese writing system. On the system and evolution of Chinese script, see Fong and Ouyang, *Chinese Calligraphy*, 47–65; Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 9–23.

59 In Peircean terms, *icons* denote mimetic signifiers that bear a resemblance to the things they stand for. *Symbols*, on the other hand, are chosen according to an arbitrarily determined system. See Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 98–119. While both of Peirce's terms *icon* and *symbol* (and further, *index*) are applicable to different aspects of the Chinese writing system (in disambiguating pictograms [icons] and ideograms [symbols]), it is the iconic character of Chinese writing that points towards its pictographic origins.

and (mental) images (*xiang* 象) in the Chinese context,[60] has given space to a wide range of aesthetic concepts, well established in art historical discourse on traditional Chinese ink painting and calligraphy over time.[61]

Reference to comics studies is useful at this stage. Jonathan Evans discusses various translational phenomena in the contexts of comics and comics scholarship. Evans reasons that the act of translation from descriptive, textual passages to the visual realm of comics "involves translating from words to images."[62] He adds that this act of translation can proceed "the other way around,"[63] when for example a comic is converted into a prose narrative. Translation should in such cases be understood intersemiotically, Evans argues, rather than interlingually—that is, as operating "between two media" rather than between two languages.[64] In light of *Visual Dialogue*'s comics-related iconic elements, as well as its status as an interculturally conceived artwork produced supposedly between two media (as represented by Wang's and Wehmer's respective art practices grounded in different cultural traditions and art genres), it would seem plausible to address *Visual Dialogue* in terms of intersemiotic comics as defined by Evans. However, the intersemiotic transfer processes, of "translating from words to images" (and vice versa), are tricky to grasp in the context of this artwork because it contains visual elements that rely on the aspects of both text and image. While Wang's written characters are by nature pictographic, Wehmer conceived of and described his speech bubbles in graphic and painterly rather than textual terms (e.g. as empty pictures, windows, picture-in-picture). The ambivalent nature of *Visual Dialogue*'s individual elements complicates and even defies an intersemiotic interpretation in Evans' sense—it instead calls for a *transsemiotic* interpretation, one that transcends the notion of "between two."[65] The indivisibilities that become apparent in

60 Fong and Harrist, *Embodied Image*, 29–31; Fong and Ouyang, *Chinese Calligraphy*, 1–5.

61 Including concepts like, "In poems there are paintings, in paintings there are poems" (*Shi zhong you hua, hua zhong you shi* 詩中有畫, 畫中有詩); "paintings-within-paintings" (*huazhonghua* 畫中畫); "images-beyond-images" (*xiangwai zhi xiang* 象外之象); "landscapes-beyond-landscapes" (*jingwai zhi jing* 景外之景), etc. See also the discussion in François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, trans. Paula M. Varsano (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 103–116. Such notions shape the widespread antithetical conception that "Chinese paintings should be 'read' and Chinese characters should be gazed at" (*Zhongguo hua yao 'du', Zhongguo zi yao kan* 中國畫要"讀," 中國字要看), as pointed out by Kneib, see Wang, "*Shu feishu*," 159–160.

62 Jonathan Evans, "Comics and Translation," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, 319–327; 319.

63 Evans, "Comics and Translation," 319.

64 Evans, "Comics and Translation," 319.

65 Moreover, *Visual Dialogue* calls for an interpretation that transcends the tripartite sign division according to the Peircean model of *icons*, *indices*, and *symbols*; see Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic," 98–119. This suggests an interpretation of *Visual Dialogue* in terms of a complex "intermedia iconicity," whose integrative

Visual Dialogue show that the artwork attests to, as well as constitutes, what I here term its text/script/image/picture-based transsemiotic shifts.

The example of *Visual Dialogue*'s far-left speech bubble containing Jiaoran's poems aptly illustrates the transformative cultural-translational processes that the work embodies. In the sense of "translation" outlined by Walter Benjamin,[66] the viewer is confronted with "a reinvention (rather than mere representation) of the original."[67] Wehmer's preconceived frames, emerging from a Western-informed aesthetic and technical system of spatial division, line drawing, and graphic shapes, have been transferred and recoded through Wang's artistic rationale, in turn conveying a conceptual and aesthetic system of structural composition and visual alignment informed by the specific framework of Chinese calligraphy.

Although an intersemiotic approach as outlined by Evans in the context of comics studies proves insufficient in the case of *Visual Dialogue*, Evans' essay provides another, more useful definition of translation. Considering the various translational forms that have been brought forth in comics scholarship,

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quality constitutes itself "through the *transsemiotic* integration of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs to complex symbolic media offers that defy to be classified solely as icons, indices, or symbols, but rather establish an emergent semiotic model that encompasses all three aspects of the sign. These transsemiotic semiotic units are designed by cultural codes and refer in multi-faceted intertextual relations to both the integrated semiotic models themselves as well as to sociocultural discourse on the aesthetic implementation of iconic devices." Sibylle Moser, "Iconicity in Multimedia Performance: Laurie Anderson's *White Lily*," in *Insistent Images*, ed. Elżbieta Tabakowska, Christina Ljungberg, and Olga Fischer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 323–345; 342.

66 In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin argues that translations involve the act of uncovering new, hitherto unexposed meanings of their source texts, thus calling into question the text's status and meaning as original/copy, primary/secondary: "Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability." Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, in *The Translation Studies Reader,* ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 16. "Übersetzbarkeit eignet gewissen Werken wesentlich—das heißt nicht, ihre Übersetzung ist wesentlich für sie selbst, sondern will besagen, daß eine bestimmte Bedeutung, die den Originalen innewohnt, sich in ihrer Übersetzbarkeit äußere." Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," in *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. IV/1*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 9–21; 10.

67 As Doris Bachmann-Medick suggests in the context of cultural and translation studies: "To become aware of the *re-invention (rather than mere depiction) of the original* through translation is surely an … important quality pertaining to a cultural-scientific understanding of translation: originals do not simply exist, they are not prior; rather, they are entirely engendered through translation in the first place." Translation by the author. "Die Einsicht etwa in die *Neuerfindung (statt bloßer Abbildung) des Originals* durch Übersetzung ist sicher eine … wichtige Qualität eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Übersetzungsverständnisses: Originale sind nicht einfach vorhanden, sie sind nicht vorgängig, sondern werden überhaupt erst durch Übersetzung geschaffen." Boris Buden, "Doris Bachmann-Medick im Gespräch mit Boris Buden: Kulturwissenschaften—Eine Übersetzungsperspektive," in *Übersetzung: Das Versprechen eines Begriffs*, ed. Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008), 29–42; 30.

Evans reasons that the diversity of these forms

> is evidence of the importance of translation in many fields and the complexity of the translation process itself—it's not just a matter of changing words from one language to another (otherwise automatic machine translation would be perfect), but a series of negotiations at the level of language, technology and culture.[68]

Not only does this definition of translation encapsulate *Visual Dialogue*'s discernable transsemiotic shifts, reflecting processes of cultural translation and negotiation taking place between its producers, it also points towards Benjamin's "task of the translator," that is, the way the interpreter, in approximating and analyzing the artwork as a transcultural case study, must perform a translational (self)inquiry of sorts.[69] Moreover, the translator, mediating between the tangents and interfaces of different sign systems,[70] must take into consideration their potential incommensurabilities and intranslatabilities, while at the same time exploring how these allow for new, hitherto unknown meanings to emerge.

Mitchell's theory of metapictures is useful in attempting to approximate and analyze the complexity of *Visual Dialogue*'s transsemiotic shifts. Metapictures are generally understood as "pictures about pictures—that is, pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures, pictures that are used to show what a picture is."[71] Mitchell distinguishes three different types:

> First, the picture that explicitly reflects on, or "doubles" itself …, in which the production of the picture we are seeing re-appears inside the picture. This is most routinely and literally seen in the effect of the "mise en abîme," the Quaker Oats box that contains a picture of the Quaker Oats box, that contains yet another picture of a Quaker Oats box, and so on, to infinity. … Second, the picture that contains another picture of a different kind, and thus re-frames

68 Evans, "Comics and Translation," 320.

69 Inasmuch as the interpreter needs to negotiate and refigure the analytical premises and frameworks on which their study is based, the translational perspective points towards its own potentials as well as limitations—the ultimately "irresolvable" condition inherent to their "task": "Indeed, the problem of ripening the seed of pure language in a translation seems to be insoluble, determinable in no solution. For is not the ground cut from under such a solution if the reproduction of the sense ceases to be decisive?" Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 20. "Ja, diese Aufgabe: in der Übersetzung den Samen reiner Sprache zur Reife zu bringen, scheint niemals lösbar, in keiner Lösung bestimmbar. Denn wird einer solchen nicht der Boden entzogen, wenn die Wiedergabe des Sinnes aufhört, maßgebend zu sein?" Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe," 17.

70 Borrowing here from Benjamin's imagery of tangent and circle, Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe," 19–20.

71 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 35.

> or recontextualizes the inner picture as "nested" inside of a larger, outer picture. Third, the picture that is framed, not inside another picture, but within a discourse that reflects on it as an exemplar of "picturality" as such. This third meaning implies, of course, that any picture whatsoever (a simple line-drawing of a face, a multi-stable image like the Duck-Rabbit, Velasquez's *Las Meninas*) can become a metapicture, a picture that is used to reflect on the nature of pictures.[72]

All three types of metapicture figure in *Visual Dialogue*, and it can be argued that they all point towards the reading of this artwork as a fuzzy-bordered, open-ended structure of text/script/picture/image-based transsemiotic shifts. The third category of metapicture is particularly salient in *Visual Dialogue*, seen through its outermost paper borders, physically delineating the artwork and its conjoined individual sheets, affixed temporarily to the wall of the CAA working studio. Encapsulating the work as a whole, and recalling Wehmer's "pictures-in-pictures," the taped borders provide the initial physical and narrative setup or framework through which *Visual Dialogue* materialized as an artwork. This outer, tape-framed bubble mirrors the rectangular speech bubbles, literally and metaphorically framing the eponymous visual dialogue—or discourse—that depicts Wang's and Wehmer's artistic encounter, thus fulfilling the function of a metapicture that reflects upon its own form and function as well as the nature and conditions of picturality as such.

Along these lines, one could interpret the back wall of the working studio as a further outer (meta)pictural frame,[73] which provides not only a place to practically affix paper sheets, but metapicturally a window (in Wehmer's sense) through which to see the (metaphorical) bigger picture of the artwork. Likewise, the image-frames that outline the photographic reproductions in Figs. 4a–b could, or indeed should, be considered in metapictural terms, since I am making use of their images as photographic documents to support this article's argument of embedding or framing *Visual Dialogue* as a case study within the larger context of Chinese contemporary calligraphy discourse.

Whichever way we choose to think of *Visual Dialogue* along the lines of metapictures (or whether we do so at all), Mitchell's typology advances a richer understanding of "the basic issues of reference that determine what a picture

72 Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes, "What do Pictures Want? An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell," *Image [&] Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative* 7, no. 15 (2006), accessed February 23, 2021, http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/iconoclasm/gronstad_vagnes.htm; Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 35–81.

73 Inasmuch as the material dimensions of the artwork's writing/painting surface were determined by the physical dimensions of its surrounding working space. As can be seen in Figs. 4a–b, the oblong size and form of the walls are echoed by the paper surface's outlines.

is about and … the 'selves' referred to in its structure of self-reference."[74] *Visual Dialogue* appears to provide ample, valuable metapictural material: not only does the work open a gateway into the "infinity of potential aspects in a picture," this infinite potentiality moreover points towards the problem inherent to "the model of reading itself," opening up the "threshold of the unreadable and even the indecipherable."[75] From such a perspective, one is confronted with epistemological problems of representation and distinction; of defining outsidedness and insidedness in ontological terms (in turn implying hierarchical relations of first/primary/main and last/secondary/minor). For example, when looking at *Visual Dialogue*'s far-left speech bubble, which, alongside Jiaoran's two poems, apparently contains another smaller bubble on the inside, one could be prompted to ask: how is this (supposed) inner bubble to be read? As part of, or distinct from the (supposed) outside one? Moreover, which bubble frames which?

Thus, while this article does formulate specific interpretative approaches to *Visual Dialogue*, it remains nevertheless aware of its inevitable epistemological limitations, thereby acknowledging the incommensurabilities and indecipherabilities that remain—indeed, not only with regard to *Visual Dialogue*, but to any given analysis relying on translational approaches. My aim, moreover, is to highlight the transcultural and art-historical value that lies in this very condition of incommensurability and indecipherability, which in turn allows us to approach artifacts like *Visual Dialogue* in a non-exceptionalist manner.

IV. *Visual Dialogue*—all just a metafiction?

Further considering *Visual Dialogue* in terms of comics, and following from the above discussion on metapictures, one may ask: What, then, of metacomics? According to Roy Cook's essay "Metacomics," the term denotes "a comic that is 'about' comics in one sense or another, where this 'meta' aspect of the narrative is intended not only to further the narrative, but also to comment on the nature of narrative itself."[76] Metacomics constitute themselves through

74 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 41–42.

75 As Mitchell states, "Of course [the] infinity of potential aspects in a picture is rarely experienced. Most images pass by and through us so quickly that we scarcely notice them. … But some of them demand more attention, and even the trivial or overlooked ones have this potential waiting to be tapped. The approach I am proposing with the metapicture is thus quite compatible with Mieke Bal's appeal for a return to the 'close reading' of images (though I'm sure she would want to interrogate the model of reading itself and raise the question of what we mean by reading, and whether the image is perhaps always opening up a threshold of the unreadable and even the indecipherable)." Grønstad and Vågnes, "What do Pictures Want?"; referring to Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts of the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 8–10.

76 Roy T. Cook, "Metacomics," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, 257–267; 257–258.

their metafictional quality, bringing attention to the nature of the narrative as narrative, often critiquing or manipulating their own form. In an attempt to further taxonomize metafictionality in comics, Cook highlights a set of five categories formulated in Matthew Jones's "Reflexivity in Comic Art," which can be used to further explore *Visual Dialogue*.[77] As with the above discussion of Mitchell's metapictures, I argue here that reference to the categories of metafictionality as defined in comics studies can further our understanding of *Visual Dialogue* and its transcultural significance. While all five categories Cook discusses can be assessed as pertaining to this artwork's metafictional quality, I shall focus on one category, the particular lens of which serves to carve out the transcultural prism of *Visual Dialogue* as metacomic: "intertextuality," which refers to "a comic that includes or references multiple texts, narratives, or works."[78]

There are references to multiple texts, narratives, and works in *Visual Dialogue*.While Wang's citations of Jiaoran's poetic texts and and Huineng's *Heart Sutra* text reference Buddhist traditions, the single character *wu* builds on and itself represents the concept of "nothingness" central to classical Daoist thought.[79] Regarding, then, the section of *Visual Dialogue* that Wang titled "Bach Fugue" and in which he shows his abstract calligraphy, though this section contains no written characters—hence no legible words or texts—its genre of "non-writing" (*feishu* 非書) is indeed regarded as its own scriptural type within contemporary calligraphy discourse.[80] The titles Wang chooses for his abstract calligraphy works, for which he frequently borrows from the titles of classical Chinese writings, are key. Through their titles, Wang's abstract calligraphies can be interpreted as quasi-abstracted texts, citations, and reiterations of the specific writings they reference; their titles enable viewers to find access into

77 These categories are intertextuality, authorial awareness, demystification, reader awareness, and intermedia reflexivity. Cook, "Metacomics," 258–259; Matthew Jones, "Reflexivity in Comic Art," *International Journal of Comic Art* 7, no. 1 (2005): 270–286.

78 Cook, "Metacomics," 258–259.

79 Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, 192–198. Wang's numerous calligraphic works that reproduce long excerpts and entire chapters from the Daoist classics illustrate his closeness to Daoism; see, for example, his variant renderings of the "Free and Easy Wandering" chapter ("Xiaoyao you" 逍遙遊) of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 [The Book of Zhuangzi] in Figs. 2a–b.

80 The various classifications of this type include "non-writing," "no-character calligraphy" (*wuzi shufa* 無字書法), "abstract calligraphy" (*chouxiang shufa* 抽象書法), and, the case of Wang's oeuvre, "chaos script" (*luanshu* 亂書), which denotes a further-developed form of Wang's abstract calligraphy that Wang developed around 2015. As with a large part of Wang's works, chaos script references the classical Daoist textual tradition, indicated by the titles of works that draw from the *Dao de jing* 道德經 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. The designation "chaos script" references the Daoist concept of primordial chaos, or disorder (*luan* 亂). For recent discussions of Wang's chaos script calligraphy, see *Shu feishu*; Vigneron, "From Antiquarianism to Chaos Script."

and read these abstracted works in context (cultural-historically, conceptually, metatextually).[81] The aforementioned title "Bach Fugue" is thus noteworthy. This title is unique among Wang's calligraphy in referencing a Western work,[82] and thus highlights the transcultural significance of Wang's and Wehmer's encounter. The musical reference (again to my knowledge unique among Wang's calligraphy) to the fugue, a genre defined by a distinct polyphonic, contrapuntal narrative structure, cements a metanarrative of *Visual Dialogue* that tells the harmonized, syncretic story of that which is "beyond East and West, beyond old and new; beyond writing and painting," as Wang wrote in his colophon. Wang's and Wehmer's artistic encounter is aptly metaphorized through the "counterpoint," defined as the "technique of combining two or more melodic lines in such a way that they establish a harmonic relationship while retaining their linear individuality."[83]

The notion of the fugue indeed appears to encapsulate *Visual Dialogue*'s central qualities of harmony, individuality, contrast, and difference: while Wang bestowed a reference to classical music upon the section of the artwork showing his abstract calligraphy, Wehmer also used musical terminology to describe the same section—somewhat ironically perhaps, through the seemingly opposed term "rock 'n' roll."[84] It is precisely through such divergences and dissonances that the artwork constitutes meaning as a collaboration, as illustrating a dialogue of differing aesthetics, and

81 For example, Wang's variant renderings of the *Zhuangzi* text seen in Figs. 2a–b, once rendered in (legible) cursive script, and once in (non-legible) chaos script (see also footnote 76).

82 There do exist examples of Wang's abstract polychrome paintings from the early 1990s whose titles carry explicit references to Western-informed themes, including "Xinshang Bijiasuo" 欣賞畢加索 (Salute to Picasso), and "Hong yu hei (yi)" 紅與黑(一) (The Red and The Black, No. 1), alluding to Stendhal. For further discussion on Wang's polychrome painting, see Hertel, "Lines in Translation," 15–17.

83 *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* 5th ed. (2016) s.v. "counterpoint," accessed December 26, 2020, https://www.thefreedictionary.com/counterpoint. The fugue is a polyphonic musical genre built upon the contrapuntal relation of a main and a countertheme, which each emerge in turn, in varying contrasting relations. *Visual Dialogue*'s reference to this genre suggests that the artwork can be interpreted as a contrapuntal transcultural encounter and dialectical exchange. While it is unclear whether Wang had these considerations in mind when choosing the title for his abstract calligraphy, the allusion to the concept of the fugue—embodied by pieces like Bach's globally known *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* (BWV 565)—effectively renders tangible the idea of *Visual Dialogue* as a harmonic, polyphonic composition defined by contrast and difference. The conception of cultural encounter as counterpoint is not new; I thank Shu-mei Shih for drawing my attention to the concept as outlined in Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995 [1940]).

84 Asked to elaborate on his description, Wehmer explained: "For me, rock 'n' roll in painting denotes painting that likes to spill itself out in a demonstration of its means, for example, in form of the guitar solo. If it is well done, it stays eternally fresh; but if over-trimmed, it quickly becomes cliché." Martin Wehmer, WeChat message to author, October 2, 2019.

acquires transsemiotic and transcultural significance. *Visual Dialogue*'s contrapuntal narrative can moreover be highlighted through the terms of metafiction, inasmuch as "metafiction has a double content, being both about the story and being about the process of storytelling," exposing "a double ontology, mixing two worlds (the actual world and the storyworld) into an impossible coexistence."[85] This double ontology as a coexistence of "two worlds" (whether or not considered "impossible") becomes evident in *Visual Dialogue*'s multiple states of double reality, encompassing not only aspects of the work as "pictures-in-pictures," or "the image that doubles itself," but also the double realities that emerge, merge, and diverge in the counterpoint of Wang's and Wehmer's artworlds.[86]

On the topic of intertextuality, an art historical note on the nature of Chinese calligraphy can illuminate the state of interrelation between *Visual Dialogue*'s variously inscribed texts, as well as aspects of textuality and scripturality as such.[87] As discussed by Birgit Hopfener, in the Chinese cultural-historical context, calligraphic works present artifacts whose cultural transmission across time and space can be understood as "not based on an assumed original physical materiality that contains and represents a bygone tradition," but rather as co-constituted dynamically and continuously, through collaborative human agency across generations and their various "practices/techniques of inscription," including the citing, copying, and emulating of ancient works.[88] The practices and techniques of Chinese calligraphy can thus be considered transcultural by

85 As Cook notes with reference to Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987); Cook, "Metacomics," 257.

86 I recently asked Wang and Wehmer to recall their collaboration and reflect, ten years on, on its meaning and gains as an intercultural dialogue. Both gave interesting answers that illustrated the distinctiveness of these artworlds (or storyworlds). Wang positively emphasized the aspect of artistic global exchange, focusing on the formal-aesthetic, compositional aspects of the artwork, particularly its structural element of "lines" (*xiantiao* 線條), therein reflecting a typical perspective of a Chinese brush-and-ink artist. He assessed the exchange as a successful symbiosis of Chinese and Western traditions. By contrast, Wehmer answered that the most positive aspect for him was a recognition of the artwork as informed by fundamentally different, culturally specific concepts and approaches manifesting a differing *Werkbegriff* (reflecting a typically Western meta-perspective, as also suggested by himself self-critically). As communicated in separate WeChat messages to the author, October 13, 2020.

87 In Chinese calligraphy history and practice, citation or emulation of a given model takes place simultaneously on the two levels of the semantic text (i.e., the linguistically decipherable dimension of the work) and the visual text (i.e., its graphic, scriptural, and stylistic form). For this reason, a calligraphic work can (by nature) always be read both intertextually, as a reference to a specific literary text, and metatextually, as a quasi-performative art critical citation, or art historiographical commentary. On this culturally specific phenomenon of calligraphy as both writing practice and art practice, see Robert E. Harrist, Jr., "Reading Chinese Calligraphy," in Fong and Harrist, *Embodied Image*, 3–27.

88 See Birgit Hopfener, "Tradition and Transmission: Shifting Epistemologies and (Art-)Historical Grounds of Contemporary Art's Relationship to the Past," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6, no. 2 (2019): 187–206; 202.

nature. Referring to the famous calligraphic work *Letters on Presenting Oranges* (*Fengju tie* 奉橘帖) by Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (ca. 303–361), whose case exemplifies the complex processes of art historical dissemination and transformation,[89] Hopfener advocates for an understanding of art objects as formed through the "open practice" of tradition and transmission, and consequently calls for a shift in epistemologies in the global discipline of art history.[90]

Visual Dialogue presents a relevant case in point. Wang's practices and techniques of inscription, in their inter- and metatextual meanings—as citations and reiterations of historical works, including their respective texts, script types, and calligraphic styles—convey a contemporary example of, as Hopfener puts it, "art history writing as a continuous engagement with traditions" understood as "an open practice of critical cultural transmission."[91] Through the visual/literal embodiment of Wang's familiar or recognizable citations of texts and script types within the unconventional frames of Wehmer's speech bubbles, *Visual Dialogue* appears to negate "essentialist discourses [that] can be framed as representations of *Chineseness*, often achieved by recognizable signifiers with respect to an assumed Chinese iconography, material or technologies."[92] Equally, by transposing the universally recognizable iconography of the speech bubble to the unconventional context of Chinese calligraphy and script art, the collaborative work demands a reading through its "multiple and entangled geo-historical / geo-cultural perspectives," and as an "ongoing / open-ended collaborative and transcultural endeavor," to borrow from Hopfener's terminology.[93]

If we are to conclude that *Visual Dialogue* can be read as a metacomic, as defined by Cook, we may transfer a central question of Cook's essay—namely, "What are metacomics good for?"[94]—to Wang's and Wehmer's collaboration: What is *Visual Dialogue* good for (as a transcultural metacomic)? To answer this question, I draw again from Cook, who cites the following statement of Ole Frahm:

89 For a reconstruction and analysis of this artwork's historical transmission, which considers the multiple identities of artworks across time and space, see Ledderose, "Chinese Calligraphy," 46–49.

90 Hopfener, "Tradition and Transmission," 188–189.

91 Hopfener, "Tradition and Transmission," 189. This is all the more tangible given *Visual Dialogue*'s patchworked visual-textual composition, which indeed resonates with the evolving collage-like structure that the fourth century *Letters on Presenting Oranges* gradually acquired over time.

92 As Hopfener points out with reference to Gladston, see Hopfener, "Tradition and Transmission," 198. Italics in original.

93 Hopfener, "Tradition and Transmission," 188–189.

94 Cook, "Metacomics," 263.

> The reading of comics is precisely *not* about reconstructing unity (of whatever) but rather to appreciate the heterogeneous signs of script and image in their particular, material quality which cannot be made into a unity.[95]

Rather than aiming to construct a semiotic "unity (of whatever)," I believe that *Visual Dialogue*'s transcultural value lies in the very disunity of signs: its text/script/picture/image-based transsemiotic shifts allow one to "appreciate the heterogeneous," and to discover new forms of signs that emerge from these shifts in Gladston's sense, the "sustained negative productivities of meaning"[96] that potentially alter perceptions of what is conventionally conceived of as "Chinese" or "Western" art.

There is another unique feature of *Visual Dialogue* that is noteworthy with regard to semiotic disunities: the artwork's material, physical format, and related (meta)aspects of narrative form and aesthetic reception. The integration of speech bubbles/text boxes and the dimensions and proportions of Wehmer's chosen format—a paper surface measuring around two meters in height and elongated to a stretch of over thirty meters—suggest an oversized visual reference to classical comic strips. Moreover, through the horizontal graphical sequence of individual picture-text panels, the graphic shape and sequence of *Visual Dialogue*'s physical format also resonates with the classical format of Chinese horizontal scrolls. Chinese horizontal scrolls, also known as handscrolls (*shoujuan* 手卷), are traditionally placed on a flat surface like a table (rather than hung on a wall), then manually unrolled and read section by section. Handscrolls are made up of consecutive text sections or picture sections, often a combination of both, and (by contrast to a typical Western comic, for example) read from right to left, following the narrative direction initially pursued by the calligrapher or painter. The viewer is thus able to mentally reconstruct, or re-narrate, the moment and process of the artwork's creation.[97] The respective picture and text sections of the handscrolls usually depict a chronological sequence of interrelated scenes, telling a story through separate, sometimes even visually framed scenarios, intended to be read in a successive manner.[98]

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95 Cook, "Metacomics," 260; citing Ole Frahm, "Weird Signs: Comics as Means of Parody," in *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics,* ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press , 2000), 177.

96 Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili*, 5.

97 On this narrative aspect of classical Chinese calligraphy and painting scrolls, see Maxwell Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 20–27; Ledderose, "Chinese Calligraphy," 35–37.

98 As exemplified by famous handscrolls such as such as *Nymph of the Luo River* (*Luoshen fu tu* 洛神賦圖), *Along the River during Qingming* (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河圖), or the *Second Ode on the Red Cliff* (*Hou Chibi fu tu* 後赤壁賦圖).

Combining references to written texts of different literary and musical genres, and rendered in different script types and calligraphic styles in a collage-like assemblage, *Visual Dialogue*'s speech-bubble-calligraphy, in its segmented structure, recalls this composition of Chinese handscrolls.[99] *Visual Dialogue* can therefore be associated with the material formats and narrative structures of classical comics as well as Chinese handscrolls, both of which imply variant, coexistent narrative structures. This then means that the reading of *Visual Dialogue*'s "narrative" either begins with the abstract calligraphy or ends with it, depending on the direction in which one reads.[100]

Here ends my consideration of various dimensions of the sequentiality, narrativity, and aesthetic reception of *Visual Dialogue*. I hope to have illustrated the overlap between modern comic books and traditional Chinese narrative formats, both of which show similarly complex textual-visual intertwinements.[101] Drawing attention to the different potential narrative formats and possible readings of *Visual Dialogue* serves to cement my overall argument, which is aimed at rendering the transcultural significance of *Visual Dialogue* tangible, including its discernable dissonances and resonances.[102]

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99 Regarding sequentiality and narrativity, then, the questions inevitably arise: Does *Visual Dialogue* have any narrative structure or discernable chronology? If so, are its written texts interconnected, and how? Is there a metanarrative? Though the answers to these questions necessitate a depth of inquiry that exceeds the limited scope of this study, we may here note one particular point that is potentially significant to further cross/transcultural readings: a Western viewer not proficient in Chinese would habitually proceed from left to right (as did Wehmer, incidentally, during the process of drawing his speech bubbles); such a reading of the ostensible oversized comic strip therefore ends with the section of Wang's abstract calligraphy on the right side. A viewer literate in Chinese, by contrast, would habitually proceed the other way around, from right to left, following the conventional sequence of a Chinese text, as though reading an oversized handscroll.

100 Different possible narratives include, for example, alternate genealogical (meta)narratives of "Chinese calligraphy." A right-to-left reading could imply an evolutional history developing from initial chaos and abstraction in a time before writing existed, to the later perhaps domesticized forms of elaborated script types. A left-to-right reading could imply a differing interpretation of Chinese calligraphy as developing from antiquarian traditions and conventions, featuring established texts, scripts, and styles, to a contemporary emancipation from these conventions through the unruly forms of abstract or chaos script calligraphy. For further possible metanarratives along these lines, see Vigneron, "From Antiquarianism to Chaos Script." A similar reading of cartoonist Saul Steinberg's *The Spiral* is considered in Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 40.

101 Concerning the complex intertwinements of text and image in the particular contexts of East Asian art, see Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch and Wibke Schrape, ed., *Moving Signs and Shifting Discourses: Text and Image Relations in East Asian Art* (Weimar: VDG, forthcoming).

102 Other issues worth considering include performative and somaesthetic aspects, or the modularization of visual forms based on modular systems of elements, blocks, units, and serial structures. See Hertel, "Inner Workings," 24–30, 209–257; Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 9–23.

V. *Visual Dialogue* and the precarities of writing (world) art history

It could be argued that Wang's references to classical texts in *Visual Dialogue* are to some degree conventional and predictable, ostensibly remaining within the established idiom of Chinese calligraphy. However, this point must be considered in relation to the historical context of the Post-Mao years and to present-day mainland China. Linking back to the discursive developments of Chinese calligraphy discussed in Section I, the significance of Hangzhou's CAA as the locale of *Visual Dialogue*'s collaboration can be illuminated by acknowledging the historical conditions surrounding reopened mainland Chinese art institutions in the Post-Mao Era. In a sub-chapter entitled "Reinventing the Art Academy" in *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s to 2000s*, Wu Hung discusses the "unduly neglected" roles that art academies played in shaping Chinese art from the late 1970s to the early 1980s:

> Most discussions of contemporary Chinese art immediately focus on independent avant-garde groups formed outside of institutional frameworks. One reason for this focus is the standard narrative of Western modern art, which traces the beginning of the avant-garde to its radical divorce from the conservative art academy. In contrast, in China, major art schools such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, the Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts [today's CAA], and the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in Chongqing have constituted the single most important cradle of adventurous contemporary artists for the past thirty years.[103]

Asserting that "art academies were governmental institutions and had to follow the Party's general policies, but many academic artists longed to free artistic creativity from political functions,"[104] Wu Hung identifies the ambiguity of art academies as official institutions "routinely engaged in avant-garde experimentation in a dialectical, even paradoxical, manner,"[105] not only in the late 1970s but also throughout the 1980s and 1990s, thereby "nourish[ing] generations of young, daring artists who first discovered their artistic individuality there."[106]

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103 Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s to 2000s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 39.

104 Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 39.

105 Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 40.

106 Hung elucidates: "After art schools reopened in 1977 and continued to proliferate … they immediately attracted a large number of talented students, including those who would defy the system to pursue alternative paths. What these students encountered in the academies were

The significance of CAA as an art institution must be considered in its context of the historically grown, polarized condition of mainland Chinese art academies as centralized state-governed institutions that constantly and paradoxically shift between the (seemingly) dichotomous nodes of propagandistic official art and newly emerging independent art. CAA's official status notwithstanding, I argue that CAA should be considered, in Wu Hung's words, as one institution that does continue to nourish "generations of young, daring artists who first discovered their artistic individuality there."[107] Similarly, Wang's artistic approach, as seen through *Visual Dialogue*—making use of perhaps predictably standardized references to conventional calligraphic idioms—must be understood in historical context, in view of Wang's impact on the mainland Chinese movements to modernize and internationalize calligraphy, as well as his role as founder and director of CAA's Chinese Modern Calligraphy Research Center over the past decades. Without his pioneering work, it is difficult to imagine that various shifts in discourse could have taken place, including the emergence of novel genres such as abstract, non-writing, and chaos-script calligraphy (as seen in Fig. 2b).[108] The new generations that have been nourished by and further nourish this discourse constitute a rich and growing worldwide community, which vigilantly explores versatile and critical boundary-crossing methods that contest the quasi-hereditary monopoly of Chinese calligraphy.[109]

Visual Dialogue may be classified as a form of interstitial art emerging in the fleeting "third space" of the CAA, whose shifting domains of government propaganda and independent experimentation (following Wu Hung's observations) opened up a temporary niche to accommodate Wang's and Wehmer's artistic exchange. Referring to Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru's aforementioned discussion, moreover, we can likewise apply to the case of *Visual Dialogue* the notions of art practices as cultural techniques

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often dated pedagogical agendas and methods, but they also found like-minded people and were immersed in the heated cultural debates typical of that period." Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 39–40.

107 This is aptly demonstrated by the CAA's quinquennial calligraphy festival "*Shu feishu* 書·非書—Writing/Non-Writing," organized by Wang Dongling since 2000. See here the references provided in footnote 4.

108 It should be added that the issue of whether or not Chinese calligraphy must by definition contain (legible) written characters has proved polarizing among calligraphy practitioners, scholars, and critics over the course of multiple decades; Wang's systematic fostering of abstract calligraphy since 2000, and his initiation of chaos-script calligraphy in 2015, became a particular target for nationalist, exceptionalist critique in some circles.

109 Notable also in this context is the recent official inauguration of Wang's former student Lu Dadong as the new vice-head of CAA's Chinese Modern Calligraphy Research Center, which took place on December 21, 2020.

of identitary (de)construction, and as strategies for survival in the third space.[110] This collaborative project—though open to visitors during the days of its realization—went largely unnoticed at CAA (unlike Wang's large-scale calligraphy performances undertaken at the academy, typically attracting large crowds, media attention, and praise from art critics). This fact seems to testify to the project's de-/re-territorialized status as "unhomely art,"[111] a curiously displaced speech-bubble-calligraphy (who, in fact, is speaking? and why?), whose "interactive 'in-betweenness'"[112] appears to play with and challenge "western expectations of the oriental toward the unexpected"[113] (as addressed by Gao and Hou), and vice versa, including assumed preconceptions of tradition and modernity. In addition, it exposes the precarity of contemporary calligraphy discourse, including the endangered minority sub-discourses remaining at its peripheries, in what could be called a survival state.

Whether or not *Visual Dialogue* is supposed to convey a larger story—any grander (meta)narrative of art—is left to speculation and imagination. It can nevertheless be registered that the individual written texts and calligraphic scripts Wang did choose to incorporate in *Visual Dialogue* were to some extent staged, also in their plurality, to convey his artistic-ideological rationale: each text and script representing a specific historical, literary, or artistic tradition. Given the additional incorporation of ostensibly exogenous elements, in the form of visual and conceptual references associated with Western genres, Wang's strategy (whether deliberately or not) counterpointed against the dilemma inherent to Chinese calligraphy as a language-/script-based and hence "monolingual" art. It likewise enabled Wang to supersede his own limited linguistic scope that otherwise hindered him from personal verbal

110 While Gao's and Hou's discussion historicizes the situation of overseas Chinese artists specifically, it relies on the general understanding that "the third space is replacing a concept of identity based on the traditional opposition between East and West." This definition further allows us to consider *Visual Dialogue* as a form of cultural production, cultural intervention, and manifestation of "immigrant culture" emerging in the in-between third space of the art academy, and challenging assumed conceptions of Eastern and Western art. The authors explain: "'Immigrant culture' should not be isolated from mainstream culture. It should instead channel one's own cultural experience to become an active and effective support in one's intervention in the mainstream. We are now aware that cultural identity is a shifting process. It goes beyond the traditional identity of nation and community. It is a process of negotiation between the individual and all kinds of historical presumptions." Gao and Hou, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space," 184, 185.

111 The term "unhomely art" is used by Gao and Hou, and refers to "Bhabha's notion of the unhomely, which he [Bhabha] distinguished from the homeless; it refers to choosing to leave home as a new way of living." Gao and Hou, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space," 185. Homi K. Bhabha, "The World and the Home," *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 141–153.

112 Gao and Hou, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space," 184.

113 Gao and Hou, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space," 185.

dialogue with Wehmer. Wang's integration of his abstract "Bach Fugue" as an equal part (indeed, equal-sized half) of *Visual Dialogue* suggests that it was not merely included as a kind of add-on, perhaps "only to provide an appearance of exhaustivity" (for example to a supposed history of Chinese calligraphy).[114]

As I hope to have shown with this article, the transsemiotic shifts evident in *Visual Dialogue* indicate epistemological shifts that facilitate or necessitate a recoding and refining of our visual literacy. *Visual Dialogue* requires a "postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality."[115] The artwork must moreover be seen in its transsemiotic condition, requiring and facilitating translational processes in form of "a series of negotiations at the level of language, technology and culture," as understood in comics studies.[116] Further, supporting Hopfener's call for a "re-consideration of how to conceptualize contemporary art's relation to the past" in global contexts, *Visual Dialogue* allows us to conceive of "art history writing as a continuous engagement with traditions."[117] Understanding the polyphonic condition of *Visual Dialogue* means recognizing it as a work that is inherently de-conventional and destabilizing. In its transcultural significance as a collaborative project, *Visual Dialogue* contributes to the deterritorialization of "Chinese calligraphy": the field whose weighty four written characters—*Zhongguo shufa*—must be understood as still inhabited, inhibited, and capitalized by the monopoly of a national hermeneutics through Han-dominated, gendered politico-aesthetic discourse in the PRC.

With this contribution, my hope is to provide some productive impulses to (global) discourse on "contemporary Chinese art," which, as CAA's Gao Shiming justifiably points out, "is an unfinished plan, a possible world."[118] In this vein, I believe that the possibilities of "contemporary Chinese calligraphy"

114 As Vigneron observes in his research on contemporary ink art, in the standard mainland Chinese accounts of Chinese art, "The practices of a very small number of Hong Kong artists seem to be included only to provide an appearance of exhaustivity to this history of Chinese art." Vigneron, "'Ink Art' as Strategy for Hong Kong Institutions," 111. The epic narrative of Chinese Art that feeds the construction and representation of a national hermeneutics is displayed both outwardly, on the global stages of writings in art history, and inwardly, on the precarious stages that uphold the story of "Greater China"—the Mainland and its peripheries of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan—whose exclusive discourse constitutes itself in a Sinocentric rhetoric of pseudo-inclusivity and pseudo-diversity. On Hong Kong's marginalization in this context of writing Chinese art history, see also Hertel, "Kowloon's Uncrowned Kings."

115 Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," 16.

116 Evans, "Comics," 320.

117 Hopfener, "Tradition and Transmission," 189.

118 Gao, "The Dismantling and Re-Construction of Bentu ('This Land' or 'Native Land')," 118.

(rather than "Chinese contemporary calligraphy") are worth striving for—indeed, such an exploration can lead us towards possible alternate histories, not of "Chinese calligraphy," but rather, of "calligraphy in China."