

KANG YOUWEI'S (1858-1927) STUDY AND VISION OF THE CHINESE CALLIGRAPHIC ART

Today, the pertinence of Kang Youwei relevant figure and the historical role he played in China during the turbulent years between the 19th and 20th century, is no further object of discussion. Kang Youwei, who came from a family in which some of his members served the country as government officials, has often been at the centre of academic debates for his political activities and for the philosophical content of his writings. Amongst Kang Youwei's characteristic traits, there was a vast and heterogeneous cultural formation, derived by his widespread interest towards different fields of human knowledge, learned from the disciplines and the writings of the western world and from the more traditional kind of culture tied to his native homeland. In China, as it is well-known, the cultural level of a person was also judged on the basis of the depth of his calligraphic education, thus, his inherent knowledge for this type of visual art, that over the centuries had developed a strong bond with the scholar-

officials.¹ Throughout his life, Kang Youwei, has dedicated time and energy to the art of calligraphy, acquiring a ample theoretical and practical knowledge, later merged in his compendium published in 1891, entitled *Guang yi zhou shuang ji* 廣藝舟雙楫.

Even in its complexity and through different observation levels, *Guang yi zhou shuang ji*, structured in twenty-seven chapters compounded in six books, presents itself like a work of criticism to calligraphy, putting in evidence Kang Youwei's approach towards this art which many considered essentially theoretical. Nevertheless, he produced an enormous amount of calligraphic works; created a personal and characteristic style, and entered, by rights (most of all for his theoretical competence), in that circle of experts and art connoisseurs, who, since the middle of the Qing dynasty, tried to inject into calligraphy new vital lymph derived from the more ancient calligraphic tradition - like those of the stone tables dating

back to the Jin (265–420) and Northern Wei dynasties (386–535) - that, in the course of history, found themselves ruled out of the process of establishing the calligraphy classical tradition already described by Ledderose.

In the *Guang yi zhou shuang ji*, despite the fundamental conceptuality, there are some parts that the author dedicated to eminently practical aspects and are concentrated in the following four chapters: *Zhi bi di er shi* (執筆第二十), where Kang Youwei offers his considerations about the right method of holding the brush; *Zhui fa di er shi yi* (綴法第二十一), discussing on the composition method of a calligraphic work starting from the correct movement of the writing tool; *Xue xu er shi er* (學敘第二十二), in which the author speaks of the right sequence to follow in the calligraphy learning process; *Shu xue di er shi san*, (述學第二十三), where, with a prose rich of personal details,



**Kang
Youwei**

Kang Youwei, relays his personal experience in studying the Chinese calligraphic art, which began at the age of ten under the guidance of his paternal grandfather, Kang Zanxiu. His grandfather, a government official, taught calligraphy in the administrative residence of Lianzhou, in the province of Guangdong. Later on, his illustrious grandson, described his attendance at the course with this words:

[At that time] I had in my mouth the sweet taste of sugar and dates², and I amused myself playing with the brushes. My defunct grandfather would begin teaching with [making] imitate [by the students] the *Yue yi lun* and the calligraphy of Ouyang Xun and Zhao Mengfu. The lesson was quite strict³.

On these occasions, Kang Youwei, had the role of his Grandfather's young attendant, whom, besides schooling him in the different examination subjects for entering the bureaucratic career, was also getting him acquainted with the basics of the calligraphic art. According to what Kang Youwei describes in this chapter, for many years, his calligraphy didn't make any substantial improvements; for his demeanour, that he defines as laid-back and slow in understanding things and also for the absence of good calligraphy rubbings in the house of his grandfather, with whom Kang Youwei was living since 3 months after the premature death of his father in 1868.

Guang yi zhou shuang ji dates the first important turning point in Kang Youwei's calligraphy learning process back to 1876, when, following his failure at the provincial examinations held the same year in Guangzhou, he decides to continue his studies at Lishan, a village near the capital of Guangdong province, under the auspices of Zhu Ciqi (1807-1881), an ex government official and a renowned Confucian scholar, who dedicated himself to teaching after his retirement from the administrative functions thirty years before at the Xinglin district in Shanxi province. Zhu Ciqi, described in *Guang yi zhou shuang ji* as *you gong bi zha* (尤工筆札) - proficient in the use of brush and paper - was known also with his sobriquet

Jiujiang, from his native place, the country town of the same name in Nanhai district, twenty-five kilometers south-west of Guangzhou.

Kang Youwei remained in Lishan for around three years, where besides the study of different disciplines as confucian classics, literature, institutions and rhetoric, he devoted himself to the refining of his calligraphy technique through the imitation of renowned works as the Ouyang Xun's masterpiece *Inscription on the Sweet-Water Spring at Jiucheng Palace*, the *Stele of the Buddhist Monk Daoyin* written by Ouyang Tong (?-691), Yan Zhenqing's (709-785) *Stele of the Yan Family Temple*, the *Stele for the Xuan Mi Pagoda* written by Liu Gongquan (778-865), as well as through modeling after the style of Song calligraphers like Su Shi (1037-1101) and Mi Fu (1051-1107)⁴.

As Kang Youwei states in his autobiography, the time spent studying with Zhu Ciqi was for him of fundamental importance. In the perspective of his calligraphic education, it was relevant, above all, in view of his acquired greater technical awareness: the author of *Guang yi zhou shuang ji* becomes aware of the fact that there are no shortcuts in the art learning process:

The study of calligraphy has a correct sequence; it is in fact essential, to know how to hold the brush. For what concerns the writing, it is necessary to begin from the structure of the character, from the horizontal and vertical strokes, defining first the square form, and later, concentrate on its characteristics, on its movement, on its flexibility. Once the characters have been well traced out, it is possible to concentrate on the calligraphic composition with its different parts and their distribution.⁵

Kang Youwei dedicates the entire twentieth chapter of *Guang yi zhou shuang ji* in describing the procedures for achieving the correct brush grip, and that starts with these words:

Mr. Zhu Jiujiang, in his "Method to hold the brush", says: "empty fist and solid fingers, horizontal wrist and perpendicular brush". Whilst

studying this method, I suffered, seeing that by putting my wrist horizontally, I could not hold the brush in a vertical position and vice-versa. Hence, during daytime, I would scrutinize Mr. Zhu's way to hold the brush [...], according to this method, by putting the wrist horizontally, the brush, takes a natural vertical position. My handwriting became more elegant and balanced but not yet strong and vigorous⁶.

In the winter of 1878 determined to go back home earlier to dedicate himself to a more individual study and to a contemplative life, Kang Youwei, left Zhu Ciqi's class, and retired close to the Xiqiao mountain, a place not far away from his hometown and specially suited to meditation for the beauty and peacefulness offered by the

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surrounding scenery. While there, in the first month of the following lunar year (1879), he met a scholar and compiler of the Imperial Academy arrived from Beijing, Zhang Dinghua, also known with his courtesy name Yanqiu. The encounter between the two, not easy at first, would later prove to be of great importance. This new acquaintance, led Kang Youwei to gather evidence on the cultural tendencies of those years, inducing him, to reconsider in a positive way the contribution that some ancient calligraphic traditions could give to the evolutionary process of the art. In his autobiography, Kang Youwei wrote few lines about this encounter:

Whilst I was living at the mount Xiqiao, the compiler of the Hanlin Academy, Zhang Yanqiu, whose name in life was Dinghua, came to

a visit at the mountain with four or five of his colleagues. [...] I met him and we had a discussion, finding ourselves in disagreement, we shouted at each other, and then he left⁷.

The reason for this argument, is explained in *Guang yi zhou shuang ji* in greater detail:

At that time, the compiler Zhang Yanqiu, told me that all the model-books *tie* were only a copy of original works and that it would have been better to study the steles *bei* [of the Northern Dynasties]. I contradicted him, quoting the “Zhanqiu” (the felt cloth) of Jiang Baishi (1155-1221), but I only did that, because I was still immersed in an old way of thinking⁸.

The old way of thinking that Kang Youwei refers to, was based on the, till then, supposed superiority of the southern calligraphic tradition with its “*tie*” model-books, in contrast with the northern one, mainly represented by the calligraphy stone tablets carved during the Six and Northern Wei dynasties; this, in short, was a calligraphic tradition of populations that Kang Youwei considered backward and primitive. His point of view was still far away from the position held by other important scholars of the middle and late Qing dynasty, who, by re-qualifying the northern calligraphic traditions and combining it with the southern ones, saw it as the way of instilling new vigour and creative spirit to calligraphy.

Later on, Kang Youwei became a good friend of Zhang Dinghua who, together with his teacher Zhu Ciqi, played a pre-eminent role in Kang Youwei's technical, teoretical and critical growth, not only in the field of calligraphy:

From my teacher, Mr. Jiujiang, I have heard the principles of virtues and justice of the [ancient] sages, from my friend, Mr. Zhang Yanqiu, I have received ample explanations on the northern literary fashion⁹.

Kang Youwei's calligraphic formation was characterized by a third important moment: the encounter with Shen Zengzhi (1850-1922), courtesy name Zipei, a scholar, calligrapher and officer of the Imperial Board of Punishments. In 1889 he supported Kang Youwei in his writing a memorial to the throne, asking for immediate reforms in order to save China from its arresting decline. The petition failed and, as Kang Youwei states in his autobiography:

Shen Zengzhi advised me not to talk any more about state affairs, and [told me that] I should happily deploy my time with the study of ancient bronze and stone inscriptions.[...] I planned to write a book [on this topic] but many other scholars were doing [the same], and so, I wrote a continuation of the work by Bao Shichen (1775-1851), that later [I called] *An Expansion of the Twin Oars of the Ship of the Art (Guang yi zhou shuang ji)*¹⁰.

After rediscovering the importance of the calligraphy of northern tradition, Kang Youwei, dedicated himself to the study and the copying of different works carved on stone tablets dating back at various ancient dynasties, like *The Stone Gate Epitaph*, but also *The Jing Shi Yu Stone Scriptures* and *The Epitaph for Zheng Xi*¹¹. As a consequence to his long practice and experience, Kang Youwei, developed a powerful wrist for calligraphy and created his own style. Presenting a detailed visual analysis of Kang Youwei's particular works ▶



goes beyond the scope of this paper; I will provide some examples to facilitate a minimal visual contact with some peculiarities of his brushstrokes.

Taking into exam, in particular, the characters written in ordinary style (*kaishu* 楷書) or running style (*xingshu* 行書), it is possible to affirm that, although he gives particular consideration to constant training and adequate technical qualification as something essential for a good calligrapher, the forms of his individual brushstrokes are rather simple, since they are lacking in virtuosity and attention to small details. If we look through his works written in the above-mentioned styles, his strokes (both round and square) show a great sense of strength, fluidity and freedom from the technical orthodoxy of the calligraphy of the Tang dynasty (618-907). Nevertheless the freedom he shows in the way of using the tip of the brush does not alter the balanced fundamentals of his writings.

Conclusions: the importance and the role of calligraphy in Kang Youwei's thought

In *Guang yi zhou shuang ji*, Kang Youwei, recognizes the pre-eminent role played by Zhu Ciqi in introducing him to the right techniques of calligraphy and in helping him to penetrate the spirit of the art. Yet, in his essay, he seems to heighten, more his abilities as a calligraphy critic and connoisseur rather than as a calligrapher in the strict sense. This was directly connected with his conception of calligraphy and to his personality, more inclined to the speculation, rather than the rigid disciplinary routine that the study of calligraphy naturally requires:

My personality leads me to investigate the deeper nature of things and I have no inclination for studies that have no concrete utility. Therefore I have been extremely lazy in studying calligraphy and I only took its general idea¹².

And more:

Calligraphy is a minor art, not particularly worthy for discussing it. [Nevertheless] even in other disciplines, if we don't aspire with decision at an advanced level of knowledge, without learning something easy, how can it be done for the more important things¹³?

These are the conclusive words of the twenty-third chapter of *Guang yi zhou shuang ji*, in which, Kang Youwei, describes his vision of the art of calligraphy defining it a minor art (*xiao yi*), intended as an instrument for reaching a more important aim: forming the character for patience



and perseverance, for appraising small details and for a correct overall view. All of these virtues, should have been part of the personality of that "sage" or "superior being" that he aimed to be, in order to carry out in its entirety, the high mission of which he felt empowered.

Notes:

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1. Ledderose, Lothar, *Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function, Orientations*, p. 35-50 (October 1986).
2. Kang Youwei talks here about a particularly happy period of his life.
3. 廣藝舟雙楫注(清)康有為著, 崔爾平較注, 上海書畫出版社, 2006.1, p.173.
4. Jiucheng gong li quan ming 九成宮醴泉銘, (632). Daoyin Fashi bei 道因法師碑 (663). Yan jia miao bei 顏家廟碑 (780). Xuan mi ta bei 玄秘塔碑 (841). Works carved in regular style (kaishu) and presently preserved in the Beilin Museum of Xi'an.
5. 廣藝舟雙楫注(清)康有為著, 崔爾平較注, 上海書畫出版社, 2006.1, p.169.
6. Ibidem, p.153.
7. 康南海自編年譜 (外二種), 樓宇烈整理, 中華書局出版, 北京 1992.9, p. 9.
8. 廣藝舟雙楫注(清)康有為著, 崔爾平較注, 上海書畫出版社, 2006.1, p.173.
9. 康南海自編年譜 (外二種), 樓宇烈整理, 中華書局出版, 北京 1992.9, p. 15.
10. 康南海自編年譜 (外二種), 樓宇烈整理, 中華書局出版, 北京 1992.9, p. 16.
11. Shi men ming 石門銘 (509), Jing shi yu 經石峪 (Northern Qi, 550-577) and Zheng wen gong bei 鄭文公碑 (511).
12. 廣藝舟雙楫注 (清) 康有為著, 崔爾平較注, 上海書畫出版社, 2006.1, p. 174.
13. Ibidem, p. 175.

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- VII. 中國古代書法家, 劉詩著, 文物出版社, 2003
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- IX. 中國書法思想史, 金开誠, 王岳川著, 河南美術出版社, 1992
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