

## Top News

### Artists breathe new life into traditional Chinese calligraphy

【Top News】Time : 2023-07-19    Source : Beijing Review    Views : 6647



An exhibition of Zhu Jingyi's calligraphy in Shanghai on January 9 (COURTESY PHOTO)

With a long writing brush and a 15-meter-long piece of paper, Zhu Jingyi, an artist in his 40s, staged a special live-stream performance on the Great Wall, one of the world's great wonders, in 2017. Chinese characters for the phrase "It's never too late for a good deed" gradually appeared on the paper as Zhu formed them with the brush.

Calligraphy is one of China's most important traditional art forms. Since ancient times, people with calligraphic skills have been respected and often been invited or commissioned to write letters, Spring Festival couplets, and ancient Chinese poems and

(/)essays as works of art. Becoming a true master of calligraphy is an endeavor that often takes decades or even a lifetime. Q | CN (<http://www.cngoesglobal.com/>)

While many consider handwriting skills less important or even outdated in this digital era, in recent years, handwritten calligraphy, along with other aspects of traditional Chinese culture, has made a strong comeback among young people.

Traditional calligraphy regains popularity among youth amid the rise of xinzhongshi, or new Chinese style, which blends traditional elements with modern ones. Nowadays, Chinese calligraphy appears not only on paper, but also on various products and in interior design. Fans, bags and clothes with handwritten calligraphy are sweeping Chinese e-commerce platforms, and calligraphy bloggers are disseminating the art through social media.

Zhu is an artist dedicated to the art. But unlike many others, he has gone even further to reinvent calligraphy. Traditional Chinese calligraphy consists of five main styles, namely seal script, clerical script, cursive script, semi-cursive script and standard script. Instead of following these traditional forms, Zhu has created distinctive techniques and named them the "Nanmen" calligraphy style, after his penname.

He has also attracted many young fans with the vernacular, humorous and witty words he has written, like "A life-long question for me is what to eat every day" and "Slowing down makes you go faster."

"It is hard for many people today to read characters written in some calligraphy styles such as the cursive script, which poses challenges for passing it on to future generations. I want to make calligraphy works more legible with down-to-earth expressions so it can be embraced by more young people," Zhu told Beijing Review.

An adventurer

During his studies at the school of fine arts at Nanjing Normal University, Zhu majored in traditional Chinese painting. His interest in calligraphy drove him to learn the writing styles of ancient Chinese calligraphy, but then his passion took him beyond simply emulating the old masters. "I worked hard but still fell behind many of my classmates in calligraphy. I wanted to create my own style but worried that conventional calligraphers might think it 'odd,' which troubled me at the time," he said.

Zhu later gained confidence when he accidentally came across an unusual piece of calligraphy. As he described, it was different from traditional calligraphy works. The work seemed to be written by an amateur with zero skills, but was actually by the famous Chinese artist Huang Yongyu (1924-2023). "In that moment, I decided to abandon traditional ways of writing calligraphy and create something new," Zhu said.

"When writing calligraphy, one is supposed to transmit one's own character and preferences through the brushes onto the page. So, why should we always follow established styles?" he asked.

(/)Zhu moved to Shanghai in 2005 and has been painting and creating installation art and doing calligraphy there ever since. He has been writing calligraphy in his own styles, using vernacular expressions and even online buzzwords. His calligraphy started becoming popular on social media platforms around 2013 and he now has around 1 million fans on Weibo, China's Twitter equivalent.

Zhu says he wants to make calligraphy accessible to more people, instead of preserving it as a niche art form. Many young people attracted by his writing styles are emulating his works. "Some of my fans who have never created any calligraphy work before may see their own potential as well as the charm of this art form, and begin learning calligraphy," he said.

In addition to Chinese characters, Zhu has also merged English words into his calligraphy works. One such work is Shen Cang Blue, which sounds similar to the Chinese phrase Shen Cang Bu Lu, meaning to hide one's ability and remain modest. Viewers who understand the meaning will be tickled by the wordplay. He has also written English sentences such as "Stay hungry, stay foolish" in calligraphy. "I once showed my works in English to people from Western countries and they liked them," he said.

His popularity among young people has gained Zhu increasing business opportunities. In 2020, bilibili, a Chinese online video-sharing platform mainly targeting Gen Zs, released a video called Houlang, literally New Waves, which refers to young people in the Chinese context. Written by Zhu, the two Chinese characters appearing in the video received much attention. "After that, many domestic companies reached out to me and said they wanted slogans in similar styles," he said.

Zhu has also teamed up with trendy brands like American luxury brand Coach, the coffee giant Starbucks and STAPLE, a U.S. streetwear label, integrating his calligraphy with the style of each company and product. He, for example, drew inspirations from traditional Chinese decorative paper cutting and shadow puppetry for his design for Coach.

Zhu has witnessed and contributed to the revival of traditional Chinese culture. When he was at college, he found it a pity there were rarely clothes with Chinese calligraphy as foreign logos were the norm. "But now Chinese people's cultural confidence is increasing. The skills to create ancient cultural forms like calligraphy are no longer limited to a small group of people," Zhu said.

"Since some people from other countries still lack a basic understanding of Chinese calligraphy, I would continue to revive calligraphy in my own ways and promote it among more people," he said.

---





Mo Shan Qiu products at the 117th China Stationery Fair in Shanghai on May 30 (COURTESY PHOTO)

### Young tones

Mo Shan Qiu, a Beijing-based brand creating handwritten calligraphy products, established by Qi Yaer and Lu Ziyi (both pseudonyms) in 2021, takes an approach similar to Zhu's. The two artists were interested in calligraphy but found that most calligraphy products were in traditional styles. Then the couple decided to create a brand of handwriting that features novel and casual styles.

With products including refrigerator magnets and postcards, Mo Shan Qiu soon attracted many young consumers. Today, the brand's products are sold in many stores across China. The couple also attends offline fairs and hand-writes notes for fans.

Words like "Make money," "Keep calm" and "Just do it" are common notes on their products. These words, like hashtags, echo the preferences of the younger generations. "Young people find our products novel and display them on their office desks to express their personalities," Qi told Beijing Review.

"Homegrown and Chinese-style products have been thriving in recent years, and domestic consumers are willing to see more of them. When people see such products, that will awaken their love for Chinese style," Qi said.