

Calligraphy

see DVD for additional material

書法
shufa
calligraphy

梅花
meihua
plum blossom

氣
qi
life force

Calligraphy (*shufa* 書法), the art of handwriting, is regarded in China as the highest form of visual art. Its artistic and expressive qualities are independent of the meanings of the written words.

The text on this hanging scroll is a poem composed by Chen, a seven-character quatrain written in four columns (read from right to left, top to bottom). The poem translates:

The Plum blossom study 梅花書屋 is crowded by chariots of war, I have already lost my home but my uncle has a house; In dreams, I go to the plum-blossoms and wake up in the study, but thick frost and light snow have finished the blossoming plums.

The poem is followed by the artist's signature and inscription: 'Hongshou 洪綬 wrote this for the appreciation of Erfu, elder brother in poetry', and two artist's seals.

The poem is autobiographical. In 1644 Chen, who was from a scholar-gentry class in Zhejiang 浙江 province, south-east China, witnessed the fall of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and the conquest of China by the Manchu tribes from the north.

Chen wrote the calligraphy for a special friend, using symbols of nature and literary puns to convey different levels of meaning, which alluded to the devastation of war. The plum blossom, (*meihua* 梅花) mentioned three times in the poem, symbolises the strength to survive under harsh conditions, as it has the power to regenerate itself. After surviving the cold winter, the prunus is the first tree to bloom in early spring, often before the snow has melted. Frost and snow are used here to signify the hostile elements that destroyed prematurely the blossoming plums. The last character, *hua* 華, meaning blossoms in '*mei* 梅 (plum) *hua* 華 (blossoms)', also means China or Chinese civilisation. By implication, like the plum blossom, China would survive the foreign rule of the Manchu barbarians in spite of the hostile elements of snow and frost, and would regenerate.

Working in the semi-cursive style of calligraphy, Chen expressed his inner anguish with elegance and restraint. The brushstrokes and tonal textures of ink are evocative of the resonance of the life force (*qi* 氣 in Chinese, pronounced 'chee') of nature, and the spontaneous movement of the brush reflects the natural flow of the artist's life energy.

Zhang Huan was born in 1965 in Anyang 安陽, Henan 河南 Province, north China. After receiving artistic training and holding several art performances in China, he moved to New York in 1998. Since then, he has been very active in holding performances and exhibitions internationally.

In this set of nine photographs, Zhang has introduced the traditional art of Chinese calligraphy to contemporary art. Instead of writing in ink on paper or silk, he writes directly on the faces of three people, one woman and two men, one of whom is the artist himself, to the left of each photograph. This is a bold and direct gesture, as the face is our most normal and immediate tool of self-expression: our moods, our emotions and our thoughts.

As we move from the first to the last of the series, the calligraphy becomes denser and the faces darker, until finally, in the last photograph, the faces are totally black and behind them are high-rise apartments. Chinese has the expression *mianse* 面色, which literally means the colour of the face, and by extension means complexion and subtle facial expression. There is a Chinese saying, that the face colour (*mianse*) expresses more than what is actually said.

In the colloquial expression '*hei* 黑 (black) *kou* (mouth) *hei* 黑 (black) *mian* 面 (face)', black mouth and black face, refers to anger, or someone who is very angry and non-cooperative. One may ask, do the black faces express anger, hopelessness or a way of hiding one's feelings? In its repetition and progression the photographs also resemble stills in a film, a modern medium. They are also photographs of a performance.

Both of these works by Chen Hongshou and Zhang Huan express their inner anguish in reaction to their political and social situations.

In the *Plum-blossom study*, Chen Hongshou is reacting to the foreign invasion of the Manchu in 1644. In the *Shanghai family tree*, Zhang seems to be expressing the impact of modernisation in China, where families are uprooted from their traditional homes, which are being torn down, and moved to high rise apartments. While Zhang's protest is daring, direct and confronting, Chen's is hidden, subtle and metaphorical, but full of hope.

Being one of the most creative, original and imaginative artists in the contemporary art scene, Zhang has transformed and regenerated Chinese art and brought it to a new dimension of contemporary international art.

CHEN Hongshou 陳洪綬
Chinese 1599–1652
Plum-blossom study 梅花書屋
(after 1644)
ink on paper, calligraphy in semi-cursive script
129.0 x 55.5 cm (image and sheet)
Felton Bequest, 1991 (AS1-1991)

ZHANG Huan 張涇
Chinese 1965–
Shanghai family tree 上海族譜 (2001)
type C photographs
(a-i) 152.0 x 228.3 cm (overall)
(installation)
Purchased with funds donated by Jason Yeap and Min Lee Wong, 2008 (2008.95)
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棋花虫屋撞具串时我
 三世字种有家梦之秋
 花青唇醒浓霜妙雪
 盖棋集

隔符萍 长正 乙
 张正正

