A Crane Among the Clouds. On a Chinese Calligraphy Couplet at the National Museum in Warsaw

Though calligraphy has long been recognised as a major artistic discipline in China, it is seldom to be found and admired in Polish museum collections, whose typically limited holdings of artefacts from China tend to be dominated by ceramics, porcelain in particular. In the era of chinoiserie, meaning the mid-17th to mid-19th century, Europeans collected mainly porcelain, while examples of the kind of works that the Chinese themselves valued in old art are scantily represented in Polish institutional collections. This seems especially understandable when it comes to calligraphy, examples of which remained generally indecipherable in Europe on account of the language barrier and their aesthetics being so alien to anything beyond the Far East.¹

One of the few works of Chinese calligraphy in Poland resides at the National Museum in Warsaw. It is a set of two vertical scrolls, 100.2 × 31.5 cm (with frame: 168.0 × 39.5 cm) each.² Their substrate is white paper while the passe-partout is of white silk mounted on a thicker paper. On the right, or first, scroll, inscribed vertically on the centre of the sheet with ink and brush is a single line of text consisting of five characters, all of them similar in size. On the left scroll, the text is composed of two elements: a main section of five similarly sized characters like in the first scroll, likewise placed at centre, with an additional three smaller characters to the left (at mid-height on the sheet), below which are two even smaller red square seals. The back sides of both scrolls are outfitted with rectangular beige labels pasted lengthwise on the upper slat of the frame, which are, however, blank. The couplet was purchased in 1984 from a private collector and it is not clear how it had arrived in Poland.

¹ An outline of this article was presented under the same title at the 11th Poland-Wide Interdisciplinary Undergraduate-Graduate Academic Conference "Between East and West, Between North and South," which took place on 10 June 2022 at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw.

² The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. SKAZmr 285/1 MNW and SKAZmr 285/2 MNW. See Marcin Jacoby, Joanna Markiewicz, Joanna Popkowska, Sztuka chińska w Zbiorach Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie / Chinese Art in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, tr. Marcin Wawrzyńczak (Warsaw, 2009), p. 139. In the Chinese language, this kind of scroll pair is called yinglian 楹聯, sometimes used interchangeably with duilian 對聯 ("couplet"). Strictly speaking, duilian is a literary term, while yinglian is a couplet calligraphed on two vertical scrolls as a single work of art – hence the name "calligraphy couplet." Sometimes such calligraphed inscriptions are engraved on two columns or rectangular panels on either side of a specific architectural space, e.g., a doorway. See Sun Guoqin 孫國欽, "Chuantong yinglian yu shufa meixue guanxi zhi tantao 傳統楹聯與書法美學關係之探討," Shu hua yishu xuekan 書畫藝術學刊 (2020), di 28 qi, p. 168; Cary Y. Liu, "Calligraphic Couplets as Manifestations of Deities and Markers of Buildings," in The Embodied Image. Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection, Robert E. Harrist, Jr. and Wen C. Fong, eds. (Princeton, 1999), pp. 360–79.

The piece was created in China. It bears the signature of Kang Youwei,³ applied with ink and brush on the left scroll (the aforementioned three smaller characters). The attribution is supported by the seals. The upper seal is an intaglio name seal engraved with four characters: Kang Youwei yin 康有為印 ("seal of Kang Youwei"). The lower one, meanwhile, belongs to the type known as xian zhang 閒章 (a "leisure seal" whose content does not directly state the owner's name). It contains no less than 27 characters in four columns, reading as follows: Wei xin bai ri chu wang shi liu nian san zhou da di you bian si zhou jing san shi yi guo xing liu shi wan li 維新百日出亡十六年三周大地遊遍四洲經三十一國行六十萬里 ("Escaping death after the Hundred Days' Reform, over sixteen years I circled the world thrice, crossed four continents, traversed thirty-one countries, covered six hundred thousand miles"). Here, while there is no designation associated with the figure of Kang Youwei himself, the message of the inscription conforms fundamentally with the facts of the artist's life.4 We know that shortly after returning to his home country, Kang asked his friend Wu Changshuo 吴昌碩 (1844-1927) to engrave a seal with the above text and henceforth marked many of his works with the seal.⁵ The calligrapher-reformer's foreign wanderings came to an end in 1913, meaning that the couplet in question must have been made at a point thereafter.

The true authorship of the work is not a certainty, however. The style of the ink and brush inscription is indeed highly reminiscent of Kang Youwei's signatures. What breeds doubt are the seal impressions. The name seal looks somewhat different than the one shown by Deng Ming (though this may result from the fact that Chinese artists tended to have several name seals). The impression of the *Wei xin...* seal, meanwhile, differs in a number of details from that illustrated by Wong and Deng. Moreover, its corners are much more rounded. The present article proposes the couplet was written by Kang Youwei, which would mean that it must have been produced between 1913 and 1927.

The main text recorded on the scrolls reads as follows: Yun he you qi yi / shen luan diao yu yin 雲鶴有奇翼 / 神鸞調玉音, which roughly translates to: "A crane among the clouds has amazing wings / the numinous bird luan emits a delightful sound" (fig. 1). The two short phrases appeal strongly to the reader's imagination, transporting them to the enigmatic and sublime world of Chinese mythology. In China, the crane is revered as a symbol of longevity and immortality. To see the bird in flight is a sign of good fortune. Taoists believe that xianren 仙人, or those who have achieved immortality, soar in the sky on the back of a crane. Thus, words relating to cranes are an expression of human yearning for freedom from death, for never-ending life. Meanwhile, the luan bird (also known as luanniao 鸞鳥) in the second phrase is a mythical creature, believed by some to be a companion of the Chinese phoenix feng 鳥

³ Kang Youwei 康有為 (b. 1858 in Nanhai, Guangdong province, d. 1927 in Qingdao, Shandong province) – a Chinese politician, reformer, philosopher, calligrapher and calligraphy theoretician; he was involved in the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898; after the failure of the movement, he left China; he returned in 1913 and settled in Shanghai, taking to cultural activity; he spent the last years of his life in Qingdao.

⁴ Aida Yuen Wong, *The Other Kang Youwei - Calligrapher, Art Activist and Aesthetic Reformer in Modern China* (Leiden-Boston, 2015), p. 86 and n. 2. Modern Asian Art and Visual Culture, vol. 4. The author argues that, in reality, Kang reached more places than stated in the seal, visiting five continents and about forty countries.

⁵ Huang Jiajia 黃加佳, Wuxu bianfa hou de Kang Youwei: 16 nian rao diqiu 3 zhou. Touzi xue ben wu gui 戊戌 變法後的康有為:16年繞地球3週. 投資血本無歸 [online], at: https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2010/11-02/2627168. shtml>, [retrieved: 5 May 2022].

⁶ Deng Ming 鄧明, Jin xian dai ming jia shu hua pin jian 近現代名家書畵品鑑 (Shanghai, 1999), p. 121.

⁷ Wong, op. cit., p. 86.

while others consider the two names to refer to the selfsame bird. As stated in *Shan hai jing* 山海經 (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) from the Warring States period, the *luanniao* lives far in the West but can be encountered in various paradisiacal lands. In its shape, the bird resembles a pheasant but its plumage has multicoloured patterns. Its appearance to a human portends of safety and peace in the world. Occasionally, the *luan* begins to sing of its own accord and the phoenix dances along to its song. The *luan* bird is a mythical symbol of ideal life; it appears where tranquillity and harmony prevail and its song is heard by those who live under the auspices of just and wise rulers.

The calligraphy couplet's main text was not composed by Kang Youwei. Its author was the outstanding Six Dynasties-period poet Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (also known as Tao Qian 陶潜, 365–427). Moreover, we are dealing here with a literary collage – an amalgam of parts of two different poems by the same author. The words from the right scroll are from the poem Lian yu du yin 連雨独飲 (I drink alone in the never-ending rain), whereas the left scroll contains a quote from Du "Shan hai jing" qi qi 讀《山海經》其七 (Reading the "Classic of Mountains and Seas", part 7).9

Though Tao Yuanming had made a name for himself as a poet still in his lifetime, it was only several hundred years after his death – in the rrth century – that he became recognised as one of China's greatest writers. His output is generally deemed idyllic, full of Taoist themes, while his style is described as simple and direct, which often put him at odds with the dominant literary style in his lifetime – the flowery, and formally already somewhat outdated "parallel writing" (pian wen 骈文).10

In keeping with the Chinese custom of titling this type of calligraphy work, the first two characters from each line are taken and then supplemented with the measure of the couplet's metric length. Thus, in the case of the work in question, it would be correct to ascribe to it the title Yun he shen luan wu yan lian 雲鶴神鸞五言聯. In English, however, we could call it A Crane Among the Clouds.

The combination of these specific fragments of poems by Tao Yuanming had already been used in calligraphy prior to Kang Youwei's time. One of the surviving examples is a calligraphy couplet of identical content bearing the signature of an earlier great master of calligraphy, Deng Shiru 鄧石如 (1743–1805).¹¹ The work of Deng was deeply influential to Kang as the latter began to develop his personal style.¹²

Taking into consideration the fact that the text of the calligraphy couplet we are concerned with is a very late amalgamation of the poetry fragments (Qing dynasty), we may expect it to

⁸ Shan hai jing 山海經, Wang Qing, Gong Shixue 王青,龔世學注评, eds. (Nanjing, 2011), pp. 20 & 50, and A Chinese Bestiary. Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas, ed. and tr. with commentary by Richard E. Strassberg (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, 2017), p. 102.

⁹ Such a fusion of poetry fragments to create a new text to be inscribed as a calligraphy work became popular during the Qing dynasty. See Wang Huizheng 王惠正, *Yinglian shufa yishu de shuang chong bian zou – tanxi yinglian shufa zai Qing dai dingsheng de duoyuanhua chengyin ji "Mei bi jian liang" zai chuangzuo zhong de yingyong kaoliang 楹聯書法藝術的雙重變奏—探析楹聯書法在清代鼎盛的多元化成因及'美必兼兩'在創作中的應用考量 [online], at: https://doi.org/http://w2.jiaodong.net/att/o/10/31/59/10315901_653753.pdf, [retrieved: 8 June 2022].*

Małgorzata Religa, "Podstawowe wiadomości o prozodii klasycznej poezji chińskiej shi," Przegląd Orientalistyczny, 1–2 (2017), p. 128.

¹¹ The website Gai8.com shows a picture of the work, though not stating where it resides: Deng Shiru 鄧石如, Yunheyou qi yi, shen luan diao yu yin 雲鶴有奇翼, 神鸞調玉音 [online], Gaiba 概吧, at: http://www.gai8.com/shufa/5837.html, [retrieved: 11 May 2022].

¹² Wong, op. cit., p. 50.

reflect the generally accepted canon of poetic beauty with regard to phonetics and syntax. Yet, the couplet's construction does not meet the requirements defined by the rule of tonal euphony in Chinese poetry. The tones of the corresponding syllables in the two lines are not opposite. In reality, the entire text with the exception of the last syllable would be pronounced in rising tones. The main reason for this lies in the fact that conscious and general usage of tonal euphony began to appear only at the twilight of the fifth century, or after the death of Tao Yuanming.

The choice to combine the two lines despite the rule of euphony was most likely a conscious decision of the individual who first made the juxtaposition. It would indeed be a highly difficult task for anyone to find two lines in Tao's body of work that would really fit together in terms of both content and the rules of prosody. We may presume that the text's creator was interested above all in the use of syntactic parallel.¹¹ According to this rule, the sequential words in the two lines play an identical grammatical role. In the case of the artwork in discussion, created are parallel sentences with the following order: attribute, subject, predicate, attribute, object. This linguistic rhythm in the short sentences is meant to induce in the reader a sense of uncomplicated beauty and subtle harmony.

The above symbolic and literary aspects of *A Crane Among the Clouds* serve as a backdrop for its visual, calligraphic, dimension. It is indeed this physical and optically perceptible aspect that most strongly determines the overall reception of the work.

Upon first glance at the couplet from a certain distance, the viewer notices that the characters of approximately identical size are distributed evenly on the two scrolls and that they appear as if placed along invisible vertical lines in the central part of each of the sheets of paper. The composition gives an impression of being highly ordered and deliberate. Yet, the initial rigidity quickly turns out to be illusory. The vermilion seal impressions in the lower section of the left scroll provide the first burst of energy. By placing them next to the inscription, the creator remained faithful to the artistic convention prevailing in Chinese calligraphy for centuries by then. Like many artists of his day, he left the impressions of two similarly sized seals – one is intaglio and the other relief, which together may create an impression of mutual complementariness and harmonious juxtaposition of opposing *yin* and *yang* elements.

The inscription is made in what is called running script (xingshu 行書), allowing relatively swift brush strokes. Because of this, some of the lines are connected – e.g., the four last strokes in the element yu 雨 in the upper part of the character yun 雲 are linked in pairs. Meanwhile, certain elements of several characters contain conventional simplifications – e.g., the last four dian 點 strokes in the character luan 鷺 are substituted with a single horizontal heng 橫 stroke, while the element yu 翌 at the top of the character yi 翼 is written with a symbol resembling two connected spirals (**fig. 2**). A factor in the expressiveness of running script, one that is also evident in the inscription here, is the sporadic use of fine brush traces that do not construct a character but connect the structural strokes and give the viewer a hint of the brush movement. In calligraphy, this produces an aesthetic effect comparable to legato in music (e.g., the line connecting the first two strokes in the character shen 神). At times, this feature takes the form of just a little more than a hook at the end of a stroke and/or the beginning of the next, as is seen in the first two strokes of the character you 有.

The form of some of the characters exhibits a subtle resemblance to how they would appear in seal script (*zhuanshu* 篆書). The calligrapher certainly must have employed a degree of

¹³ Religa, op. cit., p. 132.

archaization here. One example of this can be seen in the character yun 雲, where the lateral strokes in the element yu 雨 are slightly elongated and where a meandering line appears at the bottom of the character, as would be the case in seal script. In several places, also noticeable is a clerical script (lishu 隸書) influence. This can be found both in the construction of the characters and in the brush technique. The first of these influences makes itself apparent in, for example, the character yi 翼, written as a rare allograph in which the last three lines take the form of the element 大. This form occurred in, among others, the Han dynasty, as can be seen in the stele Xiao guan bei 校官碑. Kang Youwei mentions the stele in his book Guang yi zhou shuang ji 廣藝舟雙楫, meaning that the inscription would have been known to him. The second field of influence, that of clerical script, comes through in the terminus of the pie 撇 stroke (declining to the left) in each of the three characters of the author's signature.

The individual characters in A Crane Among the Clouds exist in a state of inner balance and in-and-of themselves constitute a dynamic composition of lines or create an impression of suspended motion. In order to achieve this effect, the calligrapher sporadically introduced minor creative modifications to the proportions or angles of inclination of certain elements. The vertical line on the left side of the character shen dark slants gently to the left and thereby harmonises better with the right element and prevents an excessive shift of the entire character's centre of balance to the left. An analogous tactic was employed in the character $yu \equiv 0$ on the same scroll. Its two upper horizontal strokes are gently elevated on the right while the last horizonal stroke drops subtly to the right, which facilitates the addition of a dian stroke (a short line reminiscent of a dot) resulting in a stable yet dynamic structure.

Much like many other five-syllable couplets written by Kang Youwei, in this piece each character appears relatively compact – rather little distance has been left between the individual lines that compose them. Meanwhile, the negative space around the individual characters is comparatively large, thanks to which the composition as a whole is more subdued and the emotional tension is not overwhelming to the viewer. ¹⁵

Looking closely at the text we notice that various fragments were executed at a different pace. Sometimes the calligrapher's brush glides along unhurriedly and fluidly, but in other places speeds up noticeably only to slow down again. In areas where the speed of the brush rises sharply there appears on the paper a visual effect known in Chinese as *feibai* 飛白 ("flying white") – the bristles of the brush separate into bunches, from between which the white of the substrate breaks through.¹6 Their eye following stroke to stroke and character to character, the viewer begins to feel the inner rhythm of the movement of the brush, the sensation growing with each instance of *feibai*.

In several spots, in addition to "flying white," Kang Youwei also uses variable brush pressure, changing quickly and irregularly, through which he achieved an effect of the lines pulsating. This is evident most prominently in the character *diao* 調, in its line arching gently to the left (**fig. 3**). A brush stroke as jittery as this makes the text dramatic and seems to be indicative of the calligrapher's crossing the line of conscious control over the brush, resulting in an impression of the uneven intervals being haphazard. A character like this gives the

¹⁴ Actual title Xiao guan zhi bei 校官之碑, also called Fan Qian bei 潘乾碑; erected in 181; currently at the Nanjing Museum (Nanjing Bowuyuan 南京博物院).

¹⁵ Wong, op. cit., p. 68 and n. 77. The term "negative space" here relates to the immediate surroundings of a given character and the space separating it from the neighbouring characters.

¹⁶ Sometimes, to achieve such an effect, a nearly dry brush is used with a small amount of ink.

impression of spontaneity rather than of a deliberate creative decision, drawing the viewer in with its naturalness and sincerity.

There is also another kind of jitteriness to certain lines in the script – mainly horizontal ones – resulting from minute directional changes in brush movements. As a result, a stroke that ought to be straight occurs to undulate, as can be seen, for example, in the upper part of the character *luan* . Such lines appear to be traced somewhat sloppily, as if the calligrapher did not have full control of the brush.

There are, however, parts of the work that are executed with bold, vigorous motions, like the last stroke in the character qi 奇. This vertical trace of the brush is terminated at the bottom with a heavily elongated hook. At first glance, it might appear to be prolonged to the point of exaggeration, yet in the end it hardly spoils the character's balance.

It is worthwhile to return once more to the aforementioned archaisation employed by the artist because it demands a few words of explanation. References to works from the past (sometimes even from the very distant past) are deeply rooted in Chinese culture and have an exceptionally long tradition. The tendency is very widespread in Chinese society. In the case of calligraphy of the middle and late Qing dynasty and of the early years of the Republic of China, archaisation achieved a special significance and was more highly regarded than ever. With increasing frequency, artists alluded to stone inscriptions, taking inspiration especially from artefacts dating back to before the Tang dynasty. The calligraphy current in which this tendency materialised is called the Stele School (bei pai 碑派), with Kang Youwei being one of its most outstanding representatives. It is therefore quite natural that certain traces of clerical and seal script made their way into the couplet in discussion. Moreover, as was already noted, some of the lines give the impression of being jittery. In addition to an emotional charge being generated by characters having such an appearance, this is an example of another kind of archaisation. These uneven brush strokes are reminiscent of lines carved in stone that, with the passage of time, have eroded to the point that their edges became somewhat jagged. Even though in A Crane Among the Clouds we are looking at a text executed in ink and brush on paper, we do, to a certain extent, get an impression of observing an old and somewhat damaged inscription on a stele. This conscious likening of hand-written text to an eroded stone inscription - even if the effect seems clumsy or sloppy - became a recognised artistic value in Chinese calligraphy at the turn of the 20th century. To

As a calligraphy couplet, A Crane Among the Clouds could have served two purposes. Probably, it was made as a work of what we call gift calligraphy, as mentioned by Qianshen Bai. At the twilight of the Qing dynasty and early Republican Period, Chinese people would very frequently give works of calligraphy as gifts, most often in the form of fans or couplets. For example, numerous gifts of this kind were given out by the Chinese ambassadors to European countries Zeng Jize 曾紀澤 (1839–1890) and Guo Songtao 郭嵩燾 (1818–91). Many people who cared about maintaining good social relations would supply themselves with a stock of self-made inscriptions to be used as gifts, filling in a dedication only when the who,

¹⁷ Another means of achieving this effect of clumsiness was sometimes to imitate the proportions of the character elements as used by the creators of certain ancient stone inscriptions.

Qianshen Bai, Calligraphy and Everyday Life among Late Qing Officials [online], lecture given on 7 November 2015 at UCLA Asia Pacific Center, Los Angeles, at: https://international.ucla.edu/media/podcasts/11.07.15-Qianshen-Bai-ub-mgd-pb-3dl.mp3, [retrieved: 4 March 2020].

which and where of the gift-giving instance became known. The calligraphy couplet from the NMW collection is supplied with only the author's signature and we have no information as to who the recipient was to be. It is thus not out of the realm of possibility that the work was prepared with an as-of-yet-unknown future social function in mind and therefore did not have a dedication added – and for some reason it remained this way.

More likely, however, A Crane Among the Clouds was produced to be sold. As we have determined, it was made after Kang Youwei's return to China. As is stated by Wong, in that period of his life Kang supported himself chiefly by doing calligraphy. In fact, surviving to this day are the artist's price lists from 1915–26 published in a Shanghai daily, thanks to which we know that a work with a personal dedication cost twice as much as a non-personalised one. Considering the fact that Kang charged approximately the equivalent of a comfortable Shanghai resident's monthly earnings for one of his average-sized couplets without a dedication, it stands to reason that many buyers would have decided against a personalised dedication for the sake of frugality.

The production of calligraphy – either for commercial purposes or to establish and maintain relations – entailed a certain degree of repetition. Calligraphers active at the turn of the 20th century sooner or later resorted to re-using (probably numerous times) the texts that they had previously put down on paper for other recipients. It is reasonable to think that such successive variations on a given text could have differed considerably in the type of script used (e.g., first time in seal script but subsequently in clerical script) or in their mode of expression or even sometimes in the very format (e.g., some texts may have been first written on a hanging scroll and in later iterations on a fan). Because of this, works of this kind cannot be treated as replicas of an original but rather as autonomous works. And each one – though produced by the same artist using the same source text – is a one-of-a-kind.

The above was true in the case of Kang, who painted the words of A Crane Among the Clouds on several different occasions. The author of the present paper has managed to track down two other works with the same content bearing this artist's signature. Both take the form of a calligraphy couplet in running script. The inscriptions, however, appear on different kinds of paper. They also differ in their expression. Moreover, one of the couplets contains a dedication, while the other is outfitted with a date (autumn of the year xinyou \rightleftharpoons meaning in this case autumn 1921).²⁰

Though many works by Kang Youwei have survived to this day in China and beyond, each one is a highly prized work of art. We can only take delight in the fact that one of them happens to have made its way into the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw.

Translated by Szymon Włoch

Wong, op. cit., p. 57.

²⁰ The calligraphy couplet with inscription was shown in the exhibition *Tian ma xing kong - Kang Youwei moji jingpin zhan* 天馬行空—康有為墨跡精品展, Kang Youwei gu ju 康有為故居 (Qingdao), 1 September - 7 October 2010 (see Kang Youwei, *Xing shu Yun he shen luan wu yan lian li zhou* 行書雲鶴神鸞五言聯立軸, paper, two scrolls, 170×43 cm, Shufa kongjian 書法空間 [online], at: http://www.9610.com/kangyouwei/73.htm, [retrieved: 5 June 2022]). The dated couplet, meanwhile, was put up for auction at Xiling yinshe (see Kang Youwei, *Xing shu wu yan lian* 行書五言聯, paper, two scrolls, 166.5×35 cm, inv. no. 1456, Xiling yinshe paimai you xian gongsi 西泠印社拍賣有限公司 [online], at: http://xlysauc.com/auction5_det.php?id=52801&ccid=397&n=1456, [retrieved: 5 June 2022]).