

M+ Commission: Tong Yang-Tze



The Art of Daily Renewal:

Legacy and Subversion in Tong Yang-Tze's Calligraphy



ABOVE
*The movement of
heaven is powerful*
(2020)

Upon entering the atrium of the Herzog & de Meuron–designed M+ building, the first work that comes into view is a set of colossal calligraphy by Tong Yang-Tze adorning two pillars that stretch toward the sky. These five works, commissioned for the opening of the museum in 2021, include four pieces that each occupy one side of a column: *The movement of heaven is powerful*; *Renew oneself daily*; *At the auspicious moment, act without delay*; and *Delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order*. *Embracing the way of heaven brings progress* encircles the second column. Installed on the upper halves of the seven-metre columns, the large-scale calligraphy is seamlessly ‘framed’ by the grey concrete in a simple manner.

Tong oriented her work on the two columns differently: four short phrases laid out vertically on one, and a longer sentence wraps around the other horizontally. With no fixed sequence for reading, the works pull visitors into the space as they enter the museum from various directions and encounter Tong’s work from different vantage points. Tong skillfully pits the weight of her calligraphy against the architecture to transcend mere decorations and project the unique aesthetics of Chinese characters and ink art front and centre at an institution devoted to contemporary visual culture.

Tong selected the eponymous passages from the *I Ching (Book of Changes)*, originally a divination manual from the ninth



ABOVE

From left: *Renew oneself daily* (2020), *The movement of heaven is powerful* (2020), and *Embracing the way of heaven brings progress* (detail) (2020)

“She consciously breaks from her own tendencies in the written form and by doing so, draws out the notion of never-ending transformations encapsulated in the *Book of Changes*.”

century BC. When Tong visited the M+ site in 2019, she had initially wanted to respond to the spirit of the new museum with verses selected from celebrated Modern Chinese poetry. After further considering Hong Kong’s role in the larger context of Chinese history, especially the city’s identity as an international metropolis, as well as the physical constraints of the space, Tong decided on the *Book of Changes*. Regarded by Confucianists as foremost of the Five Classics, the *Book of Changes* uses the principles of divination to elaborate upon the transformation and order of all things on earth and in the heavens. Profound and timeless, the *Book of Changes* has been a source of worldly knowledge, self-improvement, and encouragement for millennia.

The five phrases that Tong chose come from interpretations of auspicious hexagrams, which are horizontal lines stacked in sixty-four configurations, creating images that signify the interaction of natural elements. They reveal the perpetual movements of the heavens (‘The movement of heaven is powerful’), that people should progress each day (‘Renew oneself daily’), and that by observing the manner by which things progress, the right moment begets action (‘At the auspicious moment, act without delay’). ‘Delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order’ implies that we must also learn to accept the ways of the heavens, and ‘Embracing the way of heaven brings progress’ describes opening the path to heaven by way of layered growth.

The characters ‘天’, or heaven, and ‘行’, forward action, are repeated in the phrases Tong selected, but she composed the characters differently each time, reflecting her intention to emphasise the visual potentials of the written script. To her, the forms of the script could vary based on compositional needs and the column structure, as well as the meaning of the text. “Throughout the history of calligraphy, there have already been many ways to write a character,” she said recently, “and that proves the artistic nature of the script itself.” She consciously breaks from her own tendencies in the written form—“I am not a copy machine, of course I have to write a character differently every time”—and by doing so, draws out the notion of constant change encapsulated in the *Book of Changes*.

This is Tong’s first museum commission, and the first time she conceived works for columns. It has been no small feat, physically and creatively, for the eighty-year-old artist. The liberal application of ink requires a complete exertion of the body, and her brush channels all her exuberant energy. With incredible ingenuity, Tong enabled the power of the text to float rhythmically in space, simultaneously wrapping the wisdom of the *Book of Changes* around a pair of columns that support the museum tower.

With five succinct yet profound sentences, she has given a reminder to uphold our own cultural subjectivity and reach out to our audiences with a humanistic spirit.

For M+, commissioning Tong Yang-Tze to create calligraphy for the museum’s Main Hall was not only to visually enliven the grey concrete space through ink art, an area of artistic expression that holds Eastern philosophy at its core; there was also hope to bring audiences a greater understanding of the important role of the art of writing in Asian visual culture. Many artists in the M+ collection are inspired by the aesthetic foundations of ink art, challenging traditional frameworks to update the appeal of this established medium and practice. With her vigorous and monumental calligraphy, Tong is one outstanding example. She has upheld a staunch cultural stance since the 1970s after she returned to Taiwan following a stint in the United States as an oil painter and graphic designer. She absorbed the compositional strategies of Western modernist painting for her work and took it upon herself to highlight the aesthetic qualities of the lines in Chinese characters. For instance, in the vertically oriented works in this commission, the sizes and placements of the characters do not follow writing conventions but are closer to mid-



LEFT
From left: *The movement of heaven is powerful* (2020), *Delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order* (2020), and *Embracing the way of heaven brings progress* (detail) (2020)

“Tong subverts calligraphy by remaining true to tradition. Her thoughtful compositions highlight the tension embedded in the brushwork, transforming texts into vivid imagery that brings ancient wisdom to life.”

century American abstractions that inhabit oversized pictorial planes with expressive strokes. However, the rhythm and energy of Tong’s lines are entirely of a Chinese origin. The textual meaning dictates the style of the characters and overall layout. She repeatedly plays with the density of ink, composition, and variety of dots and strokes such that her scripts break through the conventions of traditional calligraphy.

Chinese characters are both pictorial and symbolic; this further allows her written script to possess painterly characteristics at the same time they are paintings of words. In some Western modern or contemporary art museum collections and exhibitions, one can find abstract calligraphy by the likes of Wang Dongling or Hidai Nankoku, or calligraphy serving as an inspiration for or component of modernist abstraction, such as in works by Mark Tobey. Rarely do these collections include examples of contemporary calligraphic works that maintain the form of the script. Moreover, many post-war Chinese artists, such as Chuang Che, explored abstract painting by way of calligraphy, thereby joining the international movement of abstraction by highlighting Chinese cultural characteristics.

Tong went against the grain by choosing the most culturally specific and iconic medium of calligraphy to challenge herself and audiences in this internationalisation project. She has been exhibiting her calligraphy since the 1970s, and in the 1990s she became known especially for the use of classical literature in monumental-scale works. But no matter how she creates new forms of her script, she never deconstructs or invents characters—unlike Xu Bing and Gu Wenda, mainland Chinese artists who took more conceptual approaches to traditional characters and forms—nor does she take classical texts out of context. Rather, Tong subverts calligraphy by remaining true to tradition. Her thoughtful compositions

highlight the tension embedded in the brushwork, transforming texts into vivid imagery that brings ancient wisdom to life. The monumentality of her work turned calligraphy from the graphic to the three-dimensional, infusing the viewing experience with a synthesis of light, sound, and brushstrokes in the space, thereby changing perceptions of calligraphy as merely a way to self-cultivate, propagate messages, or express feelings. In addition, she hopes to create a dialogue with the viewers through the text, inspiring them to reflect upon social realities while learning from our predecessors. In this sense, Tong’s work takes on a socially engaged aspect of contemporary art.

In an era when digital technologies make it easier than ever to communicate with images, often at the expense of text, this commission not only attests to the artistic value of the Chinese script through Tong’s belief in and respect for it; it also is a call for renewed interest in calligraphy, text, and history. Her work is a singular force to elevate the visibility of Chinese characters in a global art discourse. Interestingly, the *Book of Changes* is itself an explanation for images created by the hexagrams, and writing the interpretations in calligraphy presents a skillful synthesis of text and image, reminding us that they are not in opposition within her work but rather complementary. In this sense, she presents the most fluid and rounded exposition of the tension between image and word. Her work brings into dialogue visual form and linguistic meaning, space and planar flatness, and the ancient and the contemporary, making calligraphy an art for the ages—enduring, evolving, and to be appreciated by all.

Lesley Ma
Curator, Ink Art

Biography

Tong Yang-Tze, one of the most acclaimed artists working in calligraphy today, has been known for her craft since the 1970s. Born in 1942 in Shanghai, Tong has practiced calligraphy since childhood. After graduating from the Fine Art Department of the National Taiwan Normal University in 1966, she furthered her studies in oil painting in the U.S., obtaining a master's degree from the University of Massachusetts in 1970. Working as graphic designer in New York upon graduation, she received the Cover Design Award at the U.S. National Design Exhibition in 1972. Her experience abroad motivated her to explore ways to revitalize Chinese calligraphy in the context of contemporary art, which has been dominated by Western discourses. With this goal, Tong returned to Taiwan and fully committed to the art of calligraphy and in search for an aesthetic of the brush and ink that embraces both the tradition and the contemporary.

Tong finds inspiration in writing classical Chinese texts and adages in her calligraphy, with the intention of bringing ancient wisdom to the present. Her signature rhythmic strokes move fluidly between the cursive, running, and regular scripts,

and her spirited dots and lines negotiate between meaning and form while proposing an overlap between abstract painting and calligraphy. Often monumental in size, her works speak to the surrounding environment and architecture, expanding potentials of calligraphy art beyond the paper.

In a career of over fifty years, Tong Yang-Tze's distinctive style in the art of writing can be seen on covers of literary classics, signages in public spaces, and branding for performance groups and television dramas, showing a unique approach and commitment to inserting calligraphy into public life and popular culture, in addition to the realm of contemporary art. In recent years, she has initiated collaborations with fashion designers, choreographers, and jazz musicians, working on interdisciplinary projects to expand the possibilities and reach of calligraphy. In 2012, she was awarded the National Cultural Award, the highest honour of its kind in Taiwan. In addition to being collected by M+ and museums in Taiwan, her work has also been exhibited widely around the world. Important one-person exhibitions include *Moving Ink*, a career retrospective at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2019–2020), *Tong Yang-Tze: Immortal at the River* at the Johnson Museum of Art of Cornell University (2020), and *Brush Beyond Space: Works of Tong Yang-Tze* at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum (2010).

BELOW
Tong Yang-Tze in 2006.
Photo: © Liu Chen-Hsiang



In Conversation with Tong Yang-Tze

In November 2021, just before M+ opened to the public, Tong Yang-Tze spoke with curator Lesley Ma about this commission and her artistic practice and philosophy. This is an edited excerpt; the [full interview](#) can be found in the M+ Magazine.

Lesley Ma: You accepted our invitation for the commission in July 2019 and visited the M+ building that October while it was still under construction. Can you tell us about how you began to think about the commission after the trip?

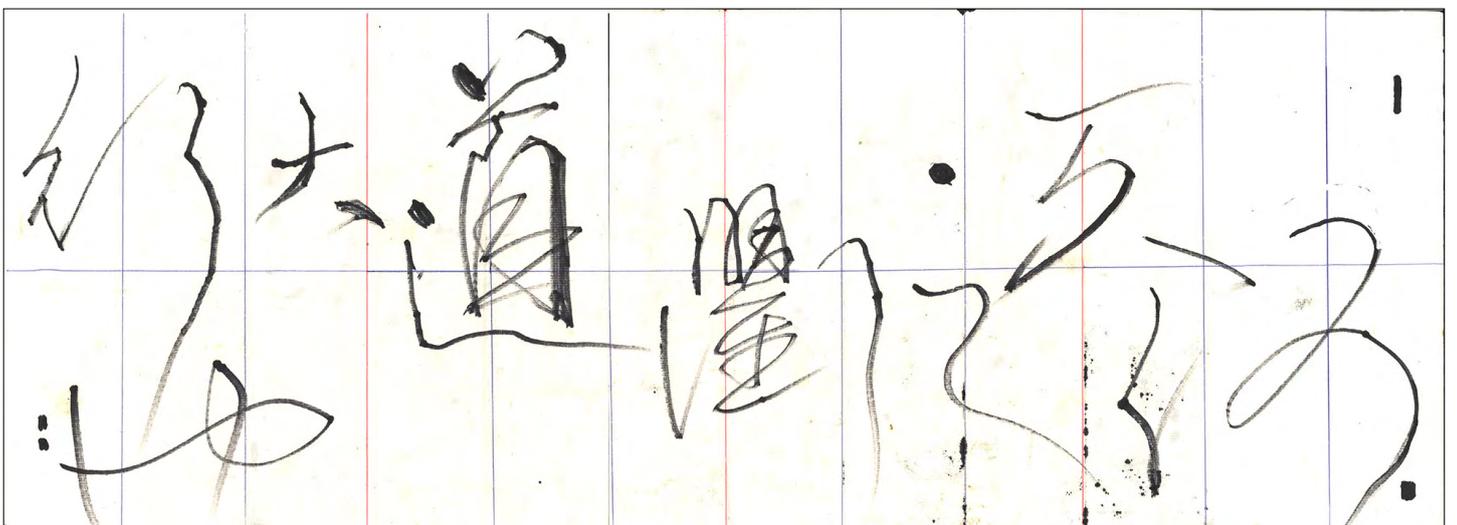
Tong Yang-Tze: When you offered two columns as the site for the commission my reaction was, 'Why not a wall?' How was I supposed to work with columns? But this dilemma should, of course, be left to the artist to resolve. Having never made work on columns before, I took up the challenge to the best of my ability. Each side of the two columns of the Main Hall faces an entrance. Ordinarily, to view an artwork you would need to stand back to gain a depth of vision, but I wanted to use the lines and strokes of the

characters to bring the viewer closer as they enter. They would have to stand right in front of the columns to see the work clearly. If I had made the two columns identical, wouldn't people think they were a Chinese couplet? That is why I wanted to write four phrases on each side of one column; and for the other one, a single sentence to encircle the whole—I wanted one phrase to connect the four sides, so that people would know this was one piece. This was the true challenge.

Ma: And so why did you choose phrases from the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*)?

Tong: If there is a heritage to be brought forth in a contemporary museum as this one, Asian philosophy is certainly the most fitting. These phrases from the *I Ching* are

BELOW
Sketch, *Embracing the way of heaven brings progress*, 2020. 20 x 55 cm. © Tong Yang-Tze.
Photo: courtesy of At Ease Studio and Eslite Gallery



philosophical ideas known to the Chinese-speaking population, reminding us how to conduct ourselves in the world. 'The movement of heaven is powerful', 'Renew oneself daily', 'At the auspicious moment, act without delay', and 'Delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order' each occupy one side. 'The movement of heaven is powerful' tells you the heavens are in motion. Abiding by 'Embracing the way of heaven brings progress', 'Delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order', and 'At the auspicious moment, act without delay' brings peace to the world. 'Renew oneself daily' implies that life should be lived anew each day, that you have to come into contact with different things every day. Your thinking can be continually renewed. Learning at any moment and from anything is also to change yourself. Isn't that great?

Ma: It is. You always work in monumental scale, and this time is no exception. Can you speak specifically about how you wrote the characters? I remember you wrote 'Delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order' thirteen times?

Tong: I don't document my process. How did I write the piece thirteen times? I never

make drafts. It is impossible to first write with charcoal and then trace with a brush. I use sketches only to determine the composition, then I use a large brush to write the whole piece in one go. So the results are different every time. Even though I work in such large dimensions and without a large studio like other artists, everything I do takes place in my home. When I write, the paper is placed on the floor, and, for example, after the '何' (he) character was written those sheets were pulled into my bedroom to dry, next to my bed. I use an electric fan to dry the cloth mat underneath, then lay more paper to continue writing the next character. I dry my work from my front door through the living room. I walk in between sheets of paper, in socks. While waiting for the ink to dry I'd go to the kitchen and check on the simmering soup on the stove. After drying, I'd hang them from a thin wire on the wall, put them together, and have a look. With years of training, I rely upon my own eyes: if there are no problems then it's set, or if I feel it's not right, I'll start over and write it again.

Ma: You've studied calligraphy since childhood, later going to the United States to study oil painting. Which artists have

BELOW

Like the eternal orbiting of the Heavens that fortify the man of principles, I shall fortify myself without cease,
1990. Ink on paper.
136.5 × 252.6 cm.
M+, Hong Kong.
© Tong Yang-Tze



been the biggest influence on you? How did you integrate the merits of oil painting with your calligraphy?

Tong: Of the Western painters, I like Matisse, and among those from the East, every artist, every calligrapher is my mentor. When I was in the fourth grade, I began to practice calligraphy via the copybooks of Yan Zhenqing; he was the first to enlighten me. Western oil painters place much emphasis on composition, and I've incorporated that into the way I organize the forms of the characters. It's something that I've learned over time. The calligraphy styles of Su Shi, Liu Gongquan, and Chu Suiliang reflect each of their characters. I would glance through the calligraphy books of these predecessors whenever I have time and think about how I could use a line or stroke like theirs in my work. But sometimes my brush would throw a point stroke way over here, or extend a line in that other direction, just following what pleases me.

Ma: How do you think calligraphy can be considered contemporary art? For audiences who do not understand Chinese and cannot understand the meaning of the characters, how do you hope for them to appreciate your work?

Tong: After I came back from the United States, I realized the enormous influence of

the West on our society. The Chinese script is our cultural heritage, but today calligraphy is only understood as writing characters with a brush, reducing the script to its function. That's why I don't call it calligraphy. I prefer 'the art of the written word'. I think I have a responsibility to reflect the artistic essence of the script. One character can be written in so many ways, and the effects of ink can be thick, thin, dense, or light. A character that I write in the morning would be completely different from one that I write in the afternoon or evening. The vitality is embedded within it. The printed word however is the same all the time. Through my work I want to highlight the lines and strokes of the characters, and I have confidence that they can most definitely lure and sustain your gaze.

Ma: It is especially crucial in this visual culture museum to make visible the position and significance of the script. Just as you mentioned, in addition to the functionality, the written character bears its own artistic nature, and thus your writing in this space also reminds us the cultural legacy of the script itself.

Tong: Thank you all for giving me the opportunity.

Ma: Thank you for such wonderful works, a brilliant boost to kickstart our new museum.

M+ Commission: Tong Yang-Tze

is presented at M+, Hong Kong,
from 11 November 2021.

Unless otherwise noted, all images are
installation views of *M+ Commission:
Tong Yang-Tze*; © M+, Hong Kong

Works in the exhibition***The movement of heaven is powerful***

2020

ink on paper

360 x 194 cm

Commissioned by M+, 2020

***Delight in the existence of heaven and
understand its order***

2020

ink on paper

360 x 194 cm

Commissioned by M+, 2020

***At the auspicious moment,
act without delay***

2020

ink on paper

360 x 194 cm

Commissioned by M+, 2020

Renew oneself daily

2020

ink on paper

360 x 194 cm

Commissioned by M+, 2020

***Embracing the way of heaven
brings progress***

2020

ink on paper

360 x 1037 cm

Commissioned by M+, 2020

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M+

About M+

M+ is a museum dedicated to collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting visual art, design and architecture, moving image, and Hong Kong visual culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Located in Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District, it is one of the largest museums of modern and contemporary visual culture in the world, with a bold ambition to be one of the world's leading cultural institutions. M+ is a new kind of museum that reflects a unique time and place, building on Hong Kong's historic balance of the local and the international to define a distinctive and innovative voice for Asia's twenty-first century.

About the West Kowloon Cultural District

The West Kowloon Cultural District is one of the largest and most ambitious cultural projects in the world. Its vision is to create a vibrant new cultural quarter for Hong Kong on forty hectares of reclaimed land located alongside Victoria Harbour. With a varied mix of theatres, performance spaces, and museums, the West Kowloon Cultural District will produce and host world-class exhibitions, performances, and cultural events, providing twenty-three hectares of public open space, including a two-kilometre waterfront promenade.