

## Translating The Visuality Of Ancient Shu Symbols Into Contemporary Calligraphy

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the aesthetic nexus between the undeciphered ancient Shu “Ba-Shu pictographs” and contemporary “modern ink-image” creation within the context of Chinese calligraphy’s search for indigenous modern transformation. The Ba-Shu pictographs, as a non-textual visual sign system, offer rich visual resources for contemporary calligraphic innovation through their biomorphic forms, enigmatic spatial tension, and ritual functions beyond semantics. The core inquiry concerns the “translation” from archaeological signs to artistic language—not as formal imitation, but as a creative transformation of ancient visual principles into the formal and spiritual core of modern calligraphy via metallized brushwork, deconstruction and reconstruction of character structures, figure-ground chaos in composition, and holistic evocation of ancient Shu mystique. Through critical analysis of representative Sichuan-based calligraphers, this paper argues that such translation not only infuses modern calligraphic imagery with primitive, indigenous aesthetic vitality, but also constitutes a profound cultural retrieval, offering a legitimate pathway for Chinese calligraphy’s contemporary development rooted in its own civilizational depths.

**Keywords:** Ba-Shu Pictographs; Modern Calligraphy; Ink-Image; Visuality; Locality.

### 1. Introduction

At a time of global cultural convergence and interaction, contemporary Chinese calligraphy stands at a historic juncture. It seeks to enter the grand narrative of world art while grappling with the profound anxiety of transforming its traditional linguistic system into modernity. For long, innovative paths have oscillated between the monumentality of stele calligraphy and the fluency of model-book calligraphy, or sought formal affinities with Western Abstract Expressionism. Yet these approaches—whether delving deeper into tradition or borrowing from abroad—have struggled to fully escape

traditional constraints or traces of grafting. It is against this backdrop that a strategy of “digging downward and rooting inward” offers new possibilities for calligraphy’s contemporary development. The study examined here, “From Ba-Shu Pictographs to Modern Ink-Image: Translating the Visuality of Ancient Shu Symbols in Contemporary Calligraphy,” exemplifies this strategy. It turns to a unique and mystical subsystem of Chinese civilization—the ancient Shu culture—seeking from its undeciphered Ba-Shu pictographs a purely visual resource beyond text, toward an indigenous modern reconstruction of calligraphic language.

The Ba-Shu pictographs, a non-narrative sign system cast on bronzes and seals remain undeciphered in archaeology and paleography. Yet their illegibility achieves a unique breakthrough in visual art. Unlike the highly standardized and serialized oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, they exhibit a primitive visual configuration suffused with shamanistic mystique. Their signs occupy an intermediate zone between figurative image and abstract mark, bearing biomorphic imaginativeness in formation, dense and chaotic spatial arrangements, and a potent irrational visual tension. Prioritizing visual expression over legibility, and likely serving functions of power and ritual, these symbols offer invaluable historical reference for breaking the traditional constraint that calligraphy must write readable characters. Academic research on Ba-Shu pictographs has largely remained within archaeological typology and history, aiming to decipher their functions and ethnic affiliations. Calligraphy theory’s engagement with ancient scripts has focused on mature systems like oracle-bone, bronze, and bamboo-silk inscriptions for archaic brushwork and structure. Treating the Ba-Shu pictographs as a “pre-writing” or “proto-writing” system—cast on bronzes and seals, still an archaeological enigma—their very unreadability enables a singular breakthrough in visual art. Divergent from the standardized, seriated oracle-bone and bronze scripts, they manifest a primitive and mystically charged visual order, hovering between figuration and abstraction, with biomorphic inventiveness, dense and chaotic compositions, and a powerful irrational visual force. Prioritizing visual impact and likely serving ritual and authority, these symbols furnish invaluable historical precedent for transcending calligraphy’s traditional text-legibility requirement.

## **2. Origin and Flow: Ba-Shu Pictographs as an Undeciphered Visual Text**

### **2.1 The Primordial Power of Form: Configuration between Biomimicry and Abstraction**

The most striking visual feature of the Ba-Shu pictographs (Fig. 1) lies in their delicate balance between figuration and abstraction. Unlike the linear abstraction of oracle-bone script or pure naturalism, they assume a biomorphic strangeness. A core vocabulary comprises highly stylized tigers, dragons, snakes, birds, and insects. These motifs are not faithful representations but radical distillations, exaggerations, and deformations. The recurrent tiger, for instance, is elongated with sinuous curves, jaws agape, fangs emphasized as menacing geometric forms, tail curling or straight as

a dagger—retaining the beast’s ferocious spirit while fully subserving decorative and symbolic formal demands. This biomimetic abstraction endows each sign with the quality of a frozen primal totem, pulsating with untamed kinetic energy and incontestable spiritual authority.



**Fig. 1 Ancient Shu Symbols**

**Source: Toutiao**

## 2.2 Spatial Tension of Chaos: Dense Composition and Figure-Ground Relationship

If configuration constitutes the vocabulary of Ba-Shu pictographs, their spatial arrangement constitutes the grammar. Unlike the orderly rows and clear composition of oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, the spatial order of Ba-Shu pictographs manifests a chaotic density and oppressive mystery (Fig. 2). On numerous bronze seals, multiple signs are tightly compressed without hierarchical ordering within confined square or round boundaries, interlocking and overlapping with little residual space. This airtight composition produces an inward-gathering, monolithic visual weight—less a legible text than an energized amulet or emblem. Such spatial treatment precludes linear, sequential reading, instead drawing the viewer wholly into a panoramic, instantaneous perception of the chaotic visual field. This holistic, atmospheric impact is precisely a core visual experience pursued by modern art. Moreover, this dense composition generates a complex figure-ground relationship. As signs occupy the majority of space, the remaining ground is fractured into irregular, fragmented shapes. These negative spaces are not passive voids but actively interact with the positive figures, co-participating in the overall visual structure. In some instances, the boundaries between figure and ground even blur into visual reversibility. This equal weighting and masterful handling of void and solid offer an invaluable model for compositional breakthroughs in

contemporary calligraphy, revealing that the shapes, sizes, and rhythmic flow of blank spaces carved out by ink lines are integral to the living pulse of the work.



**Fig. 2 Ba-Shu Pictographs on a Bronze Spoon**

Source: CCTV News

### **2.3 Non-Semantic Function: From Ritual Implement to Pure Visuality**

Ultimately, we must return to the fundamental attribute of the Ba-Shu pictographs—they were most likely not a script for recording everyday language, but ritual implements and emblems serving religious sacrifices, tribal covenants, or markers of authority. Li Xueqin noted that they “may denote clan names, official titles, personal names, or names of deities and spirits,” a functional distinction from oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions that recorded historical events. This assessment carries crucial aesthetic implications, as function determines formal orientation. As implements for communicating with the divine, their formal core aimed to create a mysterious, unknowable, awe-inspiring visual atmosphere. They needed not be understood by the masses, only recognized by specific groups or activated in ritual contexts. Their aesthetic thus prioritizes atmosphere over information, symbolism over narration, visual impact over linguistic precision. This non-semantic quality serves as a potent declaration of liberation for modern calligraphers seeking to break free from literary content and pursue pure visual expression.

## **3. Translation and Generation: A Critical Review of Creative Pathways from Archaeological Signs to Contemporary Ink-Image**

### **3.1 Translating Formal Language: From Metal and Stone Engraving to Ink Expression**

This is the most immediate level of translation—transforming hard incisions on bronze into fluid, vital ink traces on paper. Contemporary calligraphers demonstrate remarkable transformative capacity. In brushwork, they abandon the fluent, graceful turns of traditional model-book calligraphy, instead pursuing an epigraphic brush quality that resonates with the patina of antiquity. Through trembling,

dragging, rubbing, and staccato movements, combined with dry ink and flying white, they simulate on paper the mottled, massive, and time-worn textures of millennia-corroded bronze. This brushwork—which might be termed “epigraphic” sensibility—eschews smooth refinement for rugged force, imbuing each line with the weight of time and achieving a synesthetic correspondence with the materiality of Ba-Shu pictographs as ancient relics. In structure and composition, calligraphers boldly deconstruct and reassemble the pictographic signs. Rather than directly copying a particular tiger or hand motif, they disassemble these signs into essential visual components—tension-charged arcs, sharp angles, dense masses—and recombine them according to modern compositional principles into configurations both strange and familiar, archaic and novel. In composition, they absorb the dense, chaotic spirit of Ba-Shu seal arrangements, daring to create precarious dynamics. Through superimposition, collision, and interweaving of signs, they construct an airtight visual field, while modulating ink shades to create subtle layers, allowing compressed negative spaces to breathe, forming internal apertures that maintain balance and rhythm within the chaos. This translation is an appropriation and activation of the intrinsic compositional logic of ancient signs, not a replication of surfaces.

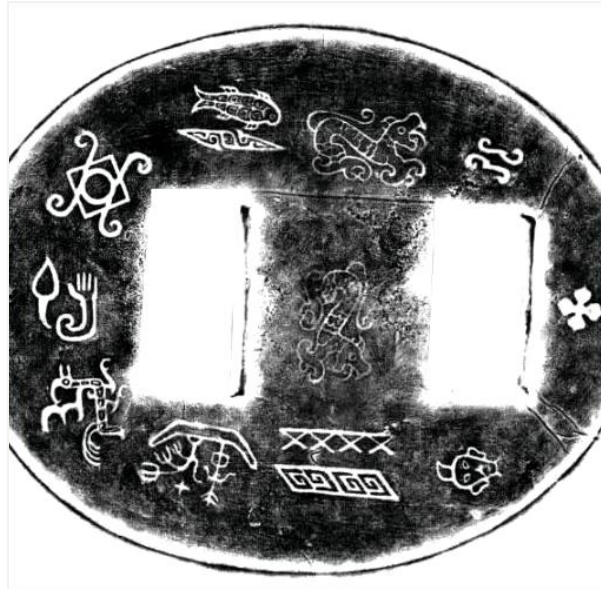
### 3.2 Translating Spiritual Import: From Shamanistic Invocation to Mindful Writing

The deeper translation operates at the spiritual dimension. Contemporary calligraphers keenly perceive that the core function of Ba-Shu pictographs was not communication but divine invocation, grounded in a shamanistic worldview. Their translation thus shifts from semantic expression to atmospheric evocation. The creative aim is no longer to inscribe a legible poem, but through translated visual signs to conjure a holistic atmosphere—mysterious, sublime, rustic, or monumental—that awakens imaginative engagement with a lost civilization. The content of calligraphy moves from concrete literary text to abstract pursuit of ancient Shu ambiance. Moreover, the creative process itself assumes ritualistic quality. In wielding the brush, the artist may no longer identify as a literati, but performs the role of a modern shaman in dialogue with antiquity. The rise and fall of brush, the movement of body, become less technical display than ritualized performance. Through this performative and inwardly focused act, the artist seeks communion with the archaic spirit latent in the signs, rendering the work as testament to this psychic. The artwork thus transcends formal aesthetics to attain anthropological depth.

### 3.3 Extending Translation through Material and Performance

Translation extends also to material supports and modes of presentation (Fig. 3). Experimentally minded artists move beyond paper and ink to rough clay, wood, or mixed media, using material textures to heighten the presence of antiquity. Simultaneously, they liberate calligraphy from the two-dimensional plane, integrating installation, video, and other contemporary forms to situate translated

ink-images within carefully constructed immersive spaces. The viewer no longer merely “looks at” a piece, but experiences a sacrificial site or civilizational ruin co-constructed by sound, light, material, and ink marks. This practice constitutes an extreme, contemporary translation of the Ba-Shu pictographs’ original attribute as three-dimensional ritual implements, substantially expanding calligraphy’s boundaries.



**Fig. 3 Ba-Shu Pictographs on a Bronze Spoon**

**Source: CCTV News**

#### **4. Value and Reflection: Implications and Limitations of Localized Innovation**

When the visual genes of Ba-Shu pictographs are successfully integrated into modern ink-image through creative translation, a sober assessment of this practice is warranted. What distinctive value does it offer contemporary calligraphy? And what pitfalls and limitations lurk along this alluring path of “localized” innovation? Only through such two-fold analysis can we deeply understand its position and trajectory in China’s contemporary art landscape.

##### **4.1 Core Value: Breakthrough and Construction on Two Fronts**

The primary value lies in aesthetic expansion. In a calligraphic field long dominated by the “Two Wangs” model-book tradition and successive stele paradigms, this practice injects a primitive, untamed, and mystically charged visual vitality. Through its non-textual and trans-semantic nature, it effectively challenges the entrenched notion of unity between calligraphy and literary content, directing viewer attention toward the purely visual impact of line, space, and ink-image. This formal exploration, grounded in an ancient civilization, provides calligraphy with a civilizational basis for freeing itself from literary subordination and strengthening its identity as an independent visual art. Second is its cultural positioning and significance of root-seeking. Against the backdrop of globalization, contemporary Chinese art often confronts identity crises. Mere imitation of Western

modernism or postmodernism tends to produce hollow facsimiles devoid of cultural substance. The translation of Ba-Shu pictographs represents a turn toward inward exploration and downward excavation. It actively draws nourishment from a distinctive regional civilization, constructing a clearly traceable local knowledge lineage from ancient Shu to the present. This not only concretizes and deepens the broad notion of “Chineseness,” but also contributes to world art an irreplicable Sichuanese paradigm unique to the upper Yangtze civilization. It renders contemporary calligraphic innovation no longer unmoored drift, but a cultural quest in spiritual dialogue with ancient ancestors.

#### 4.2 Potential Risks and Critical Reflections

This path, however, is not without perils; beneath its allure lie artistic risks demanding vigilance from creators and critics alike. Foremost is the risk of formal superficiality and mechanical appropriation of symbols. If artists approach Ba-Shu pictographs merely through exotic fascination and graphic imitation, the work risks becoming neo-antiquarian mechanical production or arbitrary collage of archaic signs onto ink surfaces. Such translation, lacking internalized spirit and contemporary conceptual integration, yields only visual novelty without genuine resonance, potentially generating a body of decorative works stylistically homogenized—bearing ancient form but neither ancient essence nor contemporary sensibility, reinforcing regional stereotypes. Second is the risk of dissolving calligraphy’s ontological language. In the intense pursuit of visual impact and spatial composition, artists may unconsciously overemphasize pictorial and decorative qualities, severely diminishing or even abandoning calligraphy’s core “scripturality”—the temporal sequence, irreversibility, and immediate correspondence between bodily movement and ink traces that fundamentally distinguish calligraphy from other two-dimensional arts. Once the richness of brushwork and rhythmic coherence are sacrificed for compositional effect, works may slip from calligraphy into modern ink painting or abstract patterning. How to stabilize the ontological status of writing within “visual translation” remains a central issue. Finally, there is the spiritual gap in cultural contextual transition. The Ba-Shu pictographs originated in a shamanistic culture where divine authority reigned; their mystery and authority derived from specific socio-historical contexts. Contemporary artists inhabit a radically different rational era; their pursuit of mystery is largely aesthetic imagination and conscious performance. Without transforming this archaic mystique into profound metaphor for contemporary human existence—merely staging an empty, theatrical archaic ambiance—works will fail to establish genuine emotional connection with contemporary audiences, and their spiritual content will remain superficial.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through deconstruction of the visual characteristics of Ba-Shu pictographs and systematic analysis of their translational pathways to modern ink-image, this paper argues that this creative practice

constitutes a trans-temporal visual dialogue. The biomorphic configurations, chaotic spatiality, and non-semantic attributes of ancient Shu symbols provide archaic yet potent support for contemporary calligraphy's breakthrough beyond textual constraints into pure visual expression. Through epigraphic brushwork transformation, deconstruction and recombination of symbolic structures, and infusion of ritualized creative acts, artists successfully translate archaeological signs into modern ink-images carrying the mysterious spirit of ancient Shu. This translation process bears dual value: aesthetically, it expands calligraphy's formal repertoire with primitive visual vitality, reinforcing its ontological status as independent visual art; culturally, it constructs a "localized" innovation path rooted in regional civilization, establishing cultural subjectivity for Chinese contemporary art in global contexts. Yet the path also faces risks of formal superficiality and dissolution of scriptuality; its true value hinges on the artist's depth of cultural insight and organic integration with contemporary concepts. Ultimately, this paper contends that the modern translation of Ba-Shu pictographs is not merely formal appropriation, but cultural root-seeking and aesthetic reinvention. It demonstrates that contemporary Chinese calligraphy can draw momentum from its own profound civilizational deposits, opening distinctive future directions between antiquity and modernity, locality and universality.

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