# WEI LIGANG

Peacocks, Concubines and Dancing Lines

MICHAEL GOEDHUIS

A visitor to Wei Ligang's studio on the outskirts of Beijing today would find it hard to discern its link with the shaded garden pavilions where his literati predecessors gathered to compose poetry, practice painting and calligraphy, drink wine, inhale the delights of nature and refine the art of convivial conversation. His motorcycle leaning against the wall, the contemporary background music and the spacious modern interior design have more in common with the taste of his avant-garde artist peers than with the austere aesthetic values of the gentleman-scholar of the past.

But Wei sees himself not only as a grateful beneficiary of the cultural legacy bestowed on him from China's long and illustrious past but also as a calligrapher whose mission is to extend that rich tradition in ways which are relevant to, and meaningful for, the world of today. He has been at the forefront of contemporary ink painting's development since the 1990s and not only was one of the organisers of The Chengdu Retrospective of Chinese Modern Calligraphy in 1999, but also one of the participants in the pioneering Modern Calligraphy exhibition at the British Museum in 2002 organised by Gordon Barrass.

It was almost impossible until recently for Westerners to grasp the significance of calligraphy for the Chinese. It has been the foundation-stone of their society since the dawn of civilisation. As Simon Leys has written, 'It is the most elite of all arts . . .practised by emperors, aesthetes, monks and poets throughout history' but also ostentatiously alive today in advertisements, cinema posters, restaurants, tea-houses, railway stations, temples and on rough village doors and walls. For the Chinese, calligraphy has been the most revered of all the arts from the late Han period (3rd century AD) onwards.

In the recent past, as the cultural world of China has broken free of the stifling constraints on creative thinking of the last 100 years or more, many different stylistic avenues have been explored by the successors of the gentleman-scholars of the past . . . the ink artists. But all are deeply aware of the classical canon and its aesthetic and moral imperatives and have diligently studied the old masters. And just as Picasso and Cézanne studied Raphael, Poussin, Velazquez and others in order to create their revolutionary pictorial language, so new literati are studying the Chinese masters in order to formulate their own revolution. More subtle than the contemporary oil painters with their abrasive handling of overtly political themes, the ink painters thus embody their message in works that are not afraid to take account of the past in order to make sense of the present.

Wei Ligang was trained as a precocious and brilliant young mathematician and it was while he was studying at the prestigious Nankai University in Tianjin that he became deeply interested in calligraphy. Within two years he had become president of the Calligraphy Society, which enabled him to connect with leading calligraphers all over the country. This exposure, both to the contemporary masters and to the study of the great calligraphers of the past, provided him with the intellectual and aesthetic hinterland... aided perhaps by the added perspective brought about via his mathematical talent...to create the ground-breaking paintings that have evolved over the past 15 years.

The initial breakthrough was for him to turn away from reproducing characters in their standard form towards a style that attempted to express the underlying poetic sense of the text or poem they represented.

This opened up the route to abstraction in both his painting and calligraphy and he has since emerged as one of the most versatile artists of his generation. His work, though extremely experimental and varied, can be viewed as fitting into two broad stylistic themes. On the one hand is his experimentation with the full range of modernistic effects produced by deploying simple traditional brush and ink techniques [e.g. Thatched Cottage, page 16-17], in particular in the gold-ground paintings and on the other, his use and distortion of his 'Wei' squares (e.g. Emerald Peacock, page 9) which are based on the square format in which characters have traditionally been positioned in classical calligraphy.

Wei's goal in generating such a rich blend of diverse visual effects is directed at stimulating the viewer to marvel at his artistic transformation of an unbending tradition that goes back 3,500 years. And it has indeed been largely due to him and the small group of pioneers who share his vision that Chinese calligraphy, while still anchored in Chinese civilisation, has shaken free of millennia of controlling convention and has now been catapulted onto the world stage.

Despite Wei's interest in western art and intellectual exchange with many western artists, in particular Brice Marden, he is primarily a Chinese artist addressing specifically Chinese cultural challenges. Indeed it is as much his desire to resist the overwhelming influence of western art as his need to break free of the remorseless logic of Chinese tradition that have led these beautiful, relaxed structures of line and form to establish their status in the new pictorial language of China.



Wei Ligang
Peacock Pearl and Jade D, 2015
Ink, acrylic and lacquer on paper
81 x 47 ½ in (206 x 120.5 cm)



**Wei Ligang**Thirty-six Concubines-Amber Black, 2010 Ink and acrylic on paper 26.77 x 53.15 in (68 x 135 cm) Signed at the lower right corner



Wei Ligang
Cross Flag, 2019
Ink and acrylic on paper  $58 \frac{3}{4} \times 45 \frac{1}{2}$  in (149.5 x 115.5 cm)



Wei Ligang
Flower Arrangement Reflected in Bird-shaped Mirror, 2014
Ink and acrylic on paper
37 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 70 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in (96 x 180 cm)



Wei Ligang
Han Brocade a, 2018
Ink and acrylic on paper
45 ½ x 39 ¾ in (115 x 101 cm)



# Wei Ligang Lotus II, 2009 Ink and acrylic on xuan paper 26 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 53 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in (68 x 135 cm) Signed at lower left



Wei Ligang
Ten Lanterns, 2006
Ink and acrylic on paper
70 3/4 x 37 3/4 in (180 x 96 cm)

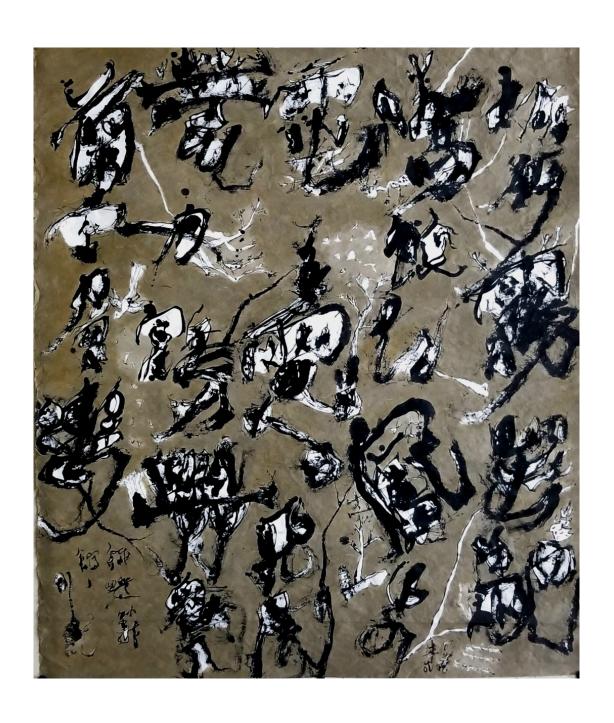


Wei Ligang

Shield Formation - Orange Black, 2020

Ink and acrylic on paper

37 x 68 ½ in (94×173.5 cm)



Wei Ligang
Wei's cursive script, 2018

ink and acrylic on paper

Ink and acrylic on paper 65 \(^{1}\sqrt{4} \text{ x 57 }\sqrt{3}\sqrt{4} \text{ in (166 x 146.5 cm)}\)

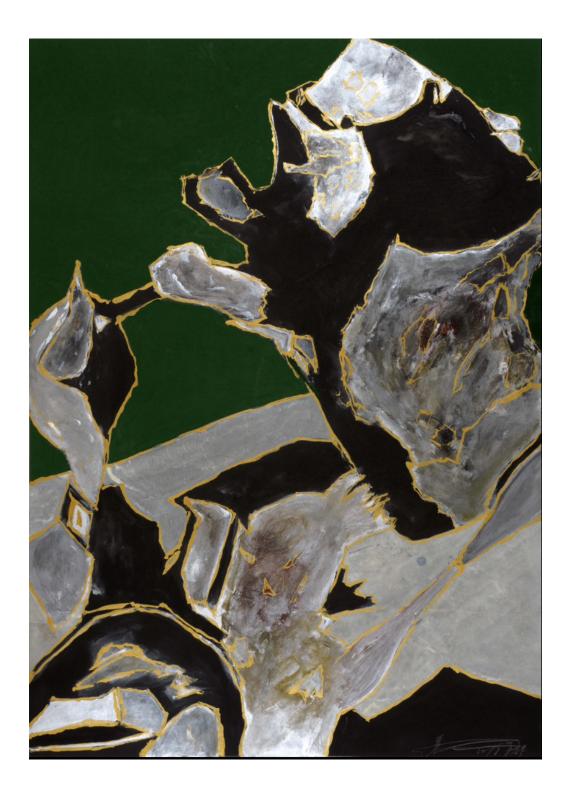


# Wei Ligang

"Red rain, dark village market, green smoke and wet palace, burning ashes to remove leaf locusts, sending taro to thank the cow doctor (Wei Guangang Notes)", 2023

Ink and acrylic on Xuan paper

37 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 70 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (96 x 180 cm)



Wei Ligang

Cave, 2018

Ink and acrylic on paper

53 ½ x 35 ¾ in (136 x 97 cm)



Wei Ligang

Amphibian Bird Rock Figure, 2020

Ink and acrylic on paper

35 ½ x 71 ¼ in (98 x 181 cm)



Wei Ligang
Phixiu Pavilion, 2023
Ink and acrylic on Xuan paper
53 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 26 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (137 x 68 cm)



Wei Ligang

Hunting in the Southern Mountains, 2010 Ink, acrylic and lacquer on paper  $35 \frac{1}{2} \times 38$  in. (90 x 96 cm)



## Wei Ligang

The Lush Mountain Path Echoing the Sound of Flowing Water is Luxuriant With Pines and Apple Trees Like A Dreamland, 2016

Ink and acrylic on paper

Each panel:  $96 \frac{1}{2} \times 48 \frac{1}{2}$  in  $(245 \times 123 \text{ cm})$  Framed:  $98 \frac{1}{2} \times 50 \frac{1}{2}$  in  $(250.2 \times 128.2 \text{ cm})$ 

