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**Abstract:**

Many contemporary Chinese artists demonstrate a strong interest in calligraphy, which they creatively reinterpret in the context of China's swift economic development, physical modernization, and social and cultural transformation. A leader among them is Wenda Gu (also known as Gu Wenda, b. 1955), whose lifelong engagement with calligraphy recently climaxed in his *Neon Calligraphy Series*, six works made between 2004 and 2007 that feature large Chinese characters in Gu's distinctive writing style, outlined in glowing neon. Appropriating an advertising vehicle for artistic expression, Gu transforms a commercial medium into a cultural one. Gu intends the series to draw attention to the great scholarly tradition of Chinese calligraphy and to make it accessible to a modern audience. Five of the works, gathered by Gu under the title *Cultural Transference*, also include European or American texts in neon roman letters juxtaposed with the Chinese to explore the problematic nature of attempts to translate between languages and cultures, brought to the fore by globalization. In three of these *Cultural Transference* works, Gu transforms Western names - of an institution, a corporation, and an exhibition - into new English poems through a creative process he calls "Complex English-Chinese Translation."

This article reviews Gu's early involvement with calligraphy and his development, for his monumental series *Forest of Stone Steles - Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry* (1993-2005), of the distinctive calligraphic style and unique "Complex English-Chinese Translation" process he subsequently applied in his *Neon Calligraphy* series. The article then turns to consider, in chronological order, every work to date in the *Neon Calligraphy Series*, attending to Gu's distinctive innovations in both calligraphy and poetry and to the rich variety of historical

and cultural references that his neons generate. The analysis also highlights issues of power implicit in Gu's work. These include his creation of art that advertises his own artistry, his command of economic resources to realize the works, his appropriation of brand and institutional names for his own artistic purposes, his assertion of creative authority in refashioning Chinese characters and in fashioning his own writing style, and, in the latest work in the series, his presentation of his outsized calligraphy in a public space that places him on a par, in the cultural sphere, with Chinese political leaders whose calligraphy is similarly publicly presented to express their patronage and power. Throughout, however, I also note the ways in which Gu's power is paradoxical, which saves it from becoming overbearing. For example, Gu depends upon already existing elements, such as texts, calligraphic styles, and linguistic conventions, as the foundation of his own artistic enterprise, limiting to a degree his own creative range. The translation of his calligraphy into other mediums requires him to rely on the skill of craftspeople and technicians for the realization of his art, testifying to his lack of absolute control over his creation. His "Complex Chinese-English Translation" process creates poetry that often lacks literary merit and is simply absurd, masking through mocking humor his self-abasement in the face of a superior cultural tradition. Finally, Gu's adoption of cross-cultural "misunderstanding" as a source of creativity also can be seen as a refusal of mastery and embrace of the mistake as a paradoxical source of creative power.