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## Messenger of the void: A conversation with artist Pan Jianfeng\*

Pan Jianfeng — a calligraphic visual artist from China. He started his career in 2002 as a design director at leading global agencies in Shanghai. He won many international awards, and his work was exhibited in major museums in China. Pan exiled himself to Finland in 2015. He creates super-normal characters and performative images through mindful graphic writing. His art practice of self-healing and self-cultivation aims to challenge the contemporary world's cultural divides. He is the author of the book *What Can We Do? Cross Cultural Visual Communication and Chinese Typography* (2013).

**Karolina Pawlik:** In public diplomacy, China actively seeks ways to spread its own core socialist values, to increase its cultural exports and to “Tell China’s Story Well.” The promotion of calligraphy remains a prominent part of this effort. Not only is calligraphy praised as part of ancient heritage and Chinese traditional culture, but it is also more and more closely associated with Chinese national identity and moral standards.

Your brush practice, Pan, offers a stunning alternative to those narratives; in which the Chinese brush, language and script tend to be considered the epitome of China’s exceptionalism and sometimes even China’s cultural superiority. You redirect focus from communicating *about* Chinese characters or brush heritage to communicating with others *through* brush-related practices.

You also perceive the practice of writing quite differently from those contemporary Chinese artists who, in order to reject submission to the state, develop artworks, performances and installations that are very critical—at times

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even full of anger. Some give up on the brush as a tool, but reference its legacies. Some aim to reveal how calligraphy and Chinese language have been appropriated by the dominant ideology throughout the centuries. Some use the brush as a tool of critique, and point out such issues as social alienation, meaningless communication, or mindless reproduction of a seemingly paralyzed or dead tradition. On the contrary, you move away from existing languages and scripts, but you have not rejected the brush; nor have you lost faith in communication. You seem to believe strongly in the timelessness and vitality of the brush, which you have turned into a personal instrument of both self-liberation and nurturing togetherness across boundaries.

**Pan Jianfeng:** It is often said that knowing a language unlocks a culture, but focusing too much on language and trusting it unreservedly leads often to the formation of unnecessary, illusionary boundaries between humans. Good communication is not simply about the correct or skillful use of language or script; the bases of communication are empathy and resonance.

**K.P.:** Your creative path has involved a persistent commitment to examining the scope and meaning of communication. For years, you have explored writing as a practice in connectivity, rather than a transfer of information. Your brush gradually took you beyond calligraphy, beyond Chinese language, beyond written communication; it seems you seek to create a much broader, multidimensional and spiritual space that fosters complementary knowledge, sensitivities and ideals, rather than simply disseminating a particular cultural message or value.

**P.J.:** Indeed, I am certainly not disseminating or exporting anything. Instead, I exiled myself: I left Shanghai six years ago, and my life in Finland is a self-exile in which I am learning to face myself and live as an individual. In China, families are usually big, and you are always surrounded by people—but every human being has to discover who they are and what they can do best. In Shanghai, there is so much struggle between the commercial and spiritual world that it is very difficult to begin and pursue such a mission. Self-cultivation has to begin with self-awareness; to gain that you need to be capable of being alone. Everybody has to find their own way, and everyone has their own talent, but the challenge is how to realize and develop it—for a good purpose, and for as long as possible, in our short human lives.

**K. P.:** You come from China, and yet now your home is in Porvoo. You live in Finland, and yet you mostly have to speak English to people around you. Would you say that those who cannot rely on words are inclined to rely fully on their hearts?

**P.J.:** Communication by heart precedes any genuine or deep communication—even in our mother tongues—that's for sure. But I realize also that since I cannot

rely entirely on words, I have to very carefully observe the world around me, and pay attention to my sensations. I engaged with my new surroundings in Finland visually and through inner understanding—I think my senses have sharpened since I moved to Finland. I have not learned Finnish yet, but that’s not because I am not interested in Finnish culture; I just choose to experience it with my body, my senses, my heart. Many important aspects of culture are not reflected in text, or cannot be expressed by language anyway... Language helps but also limits us. If you don’t understand the language, you do not have to listen to anyone, and as a stranger, you may begin to see things that easily go unnoticed, or understand things that are silent.

So this may be a valid way of learning about cultures, too; especially as I am not interested in fitting into any of the existing cultures. If countries can invent national cultures or identities, why can’t individuals invent their own as well? We are all given names by our parents, but we can later create our own names which better suit who we are. Why can’t we do the same with cultural identities? What if—in the spirit of Zen teachings—no fixed or granted culture actually exists, so you have to find it in yourself? What if that is what you and I have to develop? What if that is the true reason we left our hometowns, why we stepped outside of our initial cultures? I am of course very much aware that there are different levels of communication and cultural understanding; especially for daily life and work, where language often seems necessary; though with the advancement of technology, even these barriers are being simplified or even erased entirely.

**K.P.:** Genuine and humble brush practice teaches us that communication—between two human beings or with oneself—has its own meaning and value beyond any fixed message, immediate function, or perfect line. Would you agree that there are meanings and values that can only be fostered if, in the act of communication, we are not preoccupied with temporary information, or constrained by specific messages that supposedly need to be delivered in a particular way, within a particular time frame? It seems to me that what matters most in brush practice is the engagement: to face another human being with sincerity across time, space, generation, and any other superficial difference.

**P.J.:** I believe so, and therefore what really interests me is how to use language itself to challenge language, until what I write with my hand does not look like language or script anymore. Can we encourage a written communication that does not take a standard form, but can reach directly from one heart to another? Can we invent writing which is not about information, but purely about free spiritual communication? Can we truly oppose ideology as long as we cling to existing words, or is each clear and powerful message already a form of propaganda?

Is this not a problem you constantly face as a writer? Are you not very cautious in your work with the text, seeking ways to avoid the trap of who is in charge of

the languages you or I are supposed to use on a daily basis? Indeed, who is in charge of the language I should be speaking to you? How can these languages ever truly set us free?

**K.P.:** When we first met, many years ago, the thing you said that struck me most was that misunderstanding can be communication too. You told me that if we allow for it conceptually, illegible or hardly legible messages may invite different readings that complement each other. You said that they encourage an extended effort and multiple interpretations, and that as such they may be more abundant and rewarding than any clearly written text. Could we say that the more we take away messages as fixed verbal content, the more space we create for fruitful connection? That the more we give up on the desire to define or control the flow of the message, the more human value may be shared as a result of such communication?

**P.J.:** If two people are genuinely willing to communicate with attention and compassion, less fixed meaning may indeed imply more of a shared presence. If there is no fixed content to be deciphered, then there is no desire to judge, or to decide whose reasoning matters more. The distinction between the sender and receiver is diluted, leading to the emergence of a space in which two human beings can more freely connect, share and grow.

**K.P.:** Securing freedom of interpretation and freedom of understanding is equally as important as ensuring freedom of expression, isn't it? People often tend to focus on the value of free speech, while few seem concerned with the freedom of listening and reading the same message multiple times, in multiple ways, amid multiple life stories and paths.

**P.J.:** How can any story be perceived as the only one, or the more important one, and then imposed on others? If you have your own ideological agenda, or even a fixed idea of making art, it will never work. Of course, each of us has our own story, but it has to be permeable. It must remain open—only then can it truly be shared with others, only then can it have an impact. So I let people find their own meaning in my art, and I believe that is why art exists: to help people find their own message, which they may never have realized before. A message can only become a true message if it is nothing like a message anymore; and perhaps an open invitation to think and feel together is my message—the main intention behind my work.

I am not a piece of wood; I am alive—and as a human being I want to communicate with others, not just send or exchange messages. Through my art and my daily actions, I want to build an open, kind conversation with those outside my self. I do not want brutal arguments, I do not want to push anything in an aggressive way.

**K.P.:** You are a messenger of the void, aren't you?

**P.J.:** Maybe! I try to understand how to bring the void into our busy contemporary life using the materials I have available. By "void" I do not mean absolute emptiness—an absolute void does not exist, and is not even valuable in itself. Just like the so-called "blank" paper is never blank or white; there is always distinct lighting, texture and feeling. But, depending on how you relate to the void in your creative and spiritual practice, you can eventually achieve detachment. That is what truly matters—also for the sake of a kinder, more compassionate world.

**K.P.:** In some ways, communication through brush and paper is not unlike experiments with the power of extended eye contact between two strangers. In the end, writing lines with the brush—at least for you—is perhaps training for a quiet dialogue, which may as well be carried, for instance, in breath clouds on a frosty Finnish night.

**P.J.:** Breath clouds—I like that. In a sense communication really is essentially breathing. In Chinese, the verb *huxi* (呼吸), "to breathe," consists of two parts. *Hu* (呼) means to breathe out, to exhale, but it can also mean "to call" or "to cry out." *Xi* (吸) means to breathe in, to inhale, but it can also mean "to absorb" or "to attract." So breathing is a constant movement in and out, a continuous interaction between you and the outside, you and the universe. It is a kind of communication: you take something in, and you leave something out. In a way, as an artist, I breathe through my art practice. Indeed, brush practitioners actually have to learn how to breathe in order to control the brush well; only when your breath is harmonized with your hand can you achieve a perfect line or stroke. In that sense, my artworks are visualizations of my breath.

**K.P.:** They are, most essentially, visual representations of your life.

**P.J.:** Yes. If you do not breathe, you die. If you do not breathe correctly, you annihilate your vital energy and shorten your life.

**K.P.:** Is it ironic to you that, after all, you returned to language—specifically the word *huxi* (呼吸)—to explain languageless communication?

**P.J.:** Language is useful knowledge and important inspiration! But it is not necessarily always the most efficient or inclusive way to communicate, and it is definitely not the only way for humans to connect, communicate, or even understand each other.

**K.P.:** So maybe we should suspend our conversation here and try breath clouds instead.



Figure 1. Pan Jianfeng, *Morning Light*

Source: photograph by the artist.



Figure 2. Pan Jianfeng, *Ink Meditation*

Source: photograph by the artist.

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