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**THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF BLACK AND RED INK: FROM CHINESE  
CALLIGRAPHIC TRADITIONS TO MODERN PAKISTANI CALLIGRAPHY**

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**Abstract**

Calligraphy writing due to its rhythmic movement and beautiful representation also called the queen of arts. Artists from all over the world used different material and methods to convey the message hidden inside the calligraphy. In these materials the use of black and red inks for this creativity got cultural and historical importance. The use of these inks not only inspired the present-day artist but also have strong spiritual and emotional depth. This is one of the reasons that this art due to its spirituality adapted by Central Asian and Islamic traditions. Mostly the influence comes from Persia that took its inspiration most probably from Chinese Calligraphic styles. Taking these inspirational feelings, the study highlights the symbolic and artistic journey of calligraphy from China to modern Pakistani practices. In China these inks had different functions, where black ink was used for literary text, while red was for decoration and structural ratings. The Pakistani calligraphers also adapted the use of these colors through silk routes, but here instead of those traditional inks, modern material and techniques make ways for the upcoming artists to give new way to the field of calligraphy.

This research will further examine the transformation of black and red ink in post-independence Pakistani inscription. Instead of traditional black and red inks, modern Pakistani calligraphers start using modern experimentation with textures and compositions to preserve the symbolic and religious continuity across the two countries. This study emphasizes the ongoing importance of ink as a dynamic artistic medium and advances knowledge of how historic calligraphic practices

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influenced modern visual expression in Pakistan by taking a cross-cultural and comparative perspective.

## **Key Words**

Calligraphy, China, Traditional, Modern, Seals, Inks, Contemporary, Aesthetic, Ornamentation, Dynasty, Silk Road, Culture, Values, Expressions, Journey.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Calligraphy**

As discussed before, calligraphy appealed due to its beautiful looks, rhythm it has inside and because to its strong communicative way. Besides this, philosophers called it queen of all the other arts meaning that it not only aesthetically but spiritually inspired the civilizations (Blair, 2006; Elkins, 2008). Due to its power that it can convert the written words into visual composition make it to act like a strong bridge between language and art throughout the past (Roxburgh, 2013). Similarly, calligraphy is a powerful medium for artistic and cultural expression because of its disciplined control over various line, brush stroke variation, spacing and scales, over all proportion, which enables it to portray passion, authority, and harmony (Chang, 2010).

#### **1.1. Origin of Calligraphy**

Calligraphy was developed by the ancient civilizations as the first writing system including Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and later Islamic world (Houston, 2004). This writing system slowly and gradually gained artistic value with the progression of different material and textures being used as, examples include from stone and clay tablets to papyrus, silk and then to paper (Schimmel, 2004). Due to prohibition of figurative art In the Islamic world, calligraphy became the most popular writing and decorative art system especially on religious buildings (Blair, 2006). In China, the brush and ink techniques raised up writing into a highly philosophical art form, closely linked to Confucian and Daoist thought (Chang, 2010; Wang, 2019). With the addition of linguistic patterns, resources, religious beliefs, also including aesthetic standards all these greatly influenced the transition of calligraphy throughout time in different cultures (Roxburgh, 2001).

## **1.2. Calligraphy in Pakistan**

In Pakistan the calligraphy has gained great cultural and spiritual value to strong Islamic traditions and customs inside the region. The Islamic practice is the main reason that make calligraphy as most profound art in Pakistan (Schimmel, 2004). In the past Arabic calligraphy was used as manuscripts, for architectural ornamentation, textiles decoration and on ceramics. Today these practices are flourished with more refine and advance mediums for the same purposes even for modern graphic designing especially in styles like Naskh, Thuluth, Kufic, and Nastaliq (Kazi, 2012). Specifically, the Nastaliq style became one of the distinguishing scripts for Urdu and Persian calligraphy and continues to be essentially using to Pakistani visual arts and culture (Raza, 2018). In Pakistan, calligraphy serves as a sign of national identity, legacy, creativity and continuity in religious expression. It connects the ancient craftsmanship with contemporary Pakistani artistic imaginations (Haider, 2016).

## **1.3. Chinese Calligraphy**

In South Asia especially present-day Pakistan, the use of calligraphic ink's journey start from China influencing Persia, followed by early Islamic traditions. This artistic bridging between the civilizations becomes possible through the Silk Road (Bloom & Blair, 2003). Chinese calligraphy that is a visual art form is entrenched in political, philosophical, and in its spiritual life, where it is considered as beyond a writing technique. Chinese calligraphy has developed throughout the course of its 3,000-year Chinese calligraphy has developed during its 3,000-year history through a variety of script types, each influenced by technological advancement and dynastic culture (Barrass, 2002; Ledderose, 1979). Two distinguished ink colors are:

- Black ink: That represents authority, durability, and artistic sophistication.
- Red ink: A symbol of holy marking, correction, imperial power, and explanation.

The origin of Chinese calligraphy is embedded in Oracle Bone Script (c. 1600 BCE) during the Shang dynasty. These early writings were carved in stones and on other material, but as brush and ink technology established calligraphy then became a refined art.

### **1.3.1. Properties of Chinese Calligraphy**

#### **Black Ink:**

- A traditional Chinese ink used in calligraphy, painting and printing. Known for its deep black color and ability to produce shades of grey with water.
- Black ink is also known as India ink or sumi ink in other cultures.
- It is made of certain ingredients such as
  - Soot (lampblack or pine soot)  
It is derived from burning pine wood or oils providing the rich black pigment.
  - Animal glue (gelatin)  
Taken from animal hides or bones, it acts as a binder to hold all the particles together.
  - Fragrances or additives (optional)  
Natural resins or any herbs that add scent or for the better consistency of ink
- It is widely used in calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting (Shan shui), stamping, printmaking, modern art and design.

### **Red Ink:**

- Primary pigment (vermillion)
- It has the chemical composition of mercury sulfide (HgS) which gives it its bright red or scarlet color.
- Traditional vermillion ink is often toxic as it contains mercury which is a toxic element. Modern alternatives often use different synthetics or safer red pigments.
- In sight of cultural significance in Chinese culture red is associated with luck , prosperity, and authority.
- Historically Chinese emperor's and officials used red ink to issue imperial edicts or mark approvals. It was also used in Taoist and Buddhist ritual where Talismans and charms were written using red ink for protection or blessing.

## **2. LINK BETWEEN CHINESE AND PAKISTANI CALLIGRAPHY**

Despite coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Chinese and Pakistani calligraphic traditions have significant philosophical and artistic similarities. According to Elkins (2008) and Chang (2010), both traditions place a strong emphasis on discipline, tool mastery, and the expressive potential of line and gesture as mirrors of the artist's inner condition. The flowing

movement and balance of Islamic and Nastaliq calligraphy, which are performed in Pakistan, are similar to the Chinese brushstroke, which is directed by rhythm and spiritual intent. (Wang, 2019; Raza, 2018). In the past, creative communication between East and South Asia was fostered by trade routes like the Silk Road, which led to the emergence of common concepts of harmony, symbolism, and abstraction (Frankopan, 2015). Chinese calligraphy through its experimental techniques greatly influenced modern Pakistani art, some of the methods are unique brush strokes, freedom of movement, abstraction, signifying the importance of cross-cultural relationship between the two traditions (Haider, 2016; Wang, 2019).

### **2.1. Example: Some of the examples on black and red ink are mentioned below**

Buddhist sutras from the Tang period, written in black ink with red notes for pronunciation and interpretation (Pl: 1).

### **2.2. The Silk Road as a Cultural Bridge**

Practices of Black and Red Ink Transmission:

- Buddhist priests from China sent texts written in black ink to Dunhuang, Turfan, and Samarkand.
  - Red ink was used for headings, sacred words, and marginal comments in important Asian spiritual writings.

#### **Example:**

- Dunhuang cave libraries contained both Chinese sutras and Sogdian/Persian manuscripts with similar ink usage (Pl:2).

### **2.3. Central Asian Adaptation**

#### **Religious Context of color utilization in Manuscripts**

Islamic lifestyle

Black ink became historically used for the primary body textual content of Qur'anic manuscripts and different spiritual writings due to its legibility, permanence, and accessibility. Besides, Red ink served multiple functions like, Vowel markings (diacritics) in early Qur'ans to useful resource

pronunciation for non-Arabic speakers, Highlighting sacred names along with “Allah,” “Muhammad,” or the Prophets, underscoring reverence and divine emphasis. It also emphasize the key phrases, headings, or exegetical notes in Qur’anic commentaries (tafsir), red, related to divine presence, lifestyles, and protection, symbolized the non-secular energy imbued within the sacred textual content.

#### Chinese language non-secular & Imperial Traditions

Here red become the shade of the imperial courtroom, however additionally held deep spiritual that means in Daoist and Buddhist traditions—representing cosmic energy, auspiciousness, and divine electricity. Buddhist scriptures occasionally used red ink for sacred syllables (mantras) or to demarcate holy passages, believed to own spiritual efficacy when written in purple, using red seals on spiritual and legit files symbolized authority, legitimacy, and frequently the blessing of heaven. In Daoism, red become believed to thrust back evil spirits, and so became used in talismans and sacred texts to beautify shielding qualities.

#### Co-Cultural Parallels

Both Islamic and Chinese traditions imbued red ink with sacred connotations divinity, authority, existence force though implemented otherwise because of theological frameworks. Manuscript illumination in each tradition became now not merely decorative however ritually and symbolically charged, guiding the reader through a religious adventure.

#### **2.4. Paving the Way for South Asian Influence**

The blending of important Asian and Chinese calligraphic traditions produced a hybrid style that eventually made its way to the Indian subcontinent along with Islam, change, and cross-cultural interaction. The sacred geometry of Islamic scripts and the artistic fluidity of brush-based traces from the Chinese language subculture combined to create the Mughal technology's rich calligraphic subculture, which in turn influenced Pakistani calligraphy in the 20th and 21st centuries (Pl:3).

### **3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Black and red ink have played a key role in shaping calligraphic aesthetics, symbolism, and visual hierarchy, greatly influencing Central Asian and Islamic manuscripts to post-independence Pakistani calligraphy. Besides examination the comparative use of black and red take limited critical attention. Furthermore, the role of historical transmission in terms of ink usage is rarely addressed in a unified framework.

Thus, the problem addressed by this study is the absence of a unified, cross-cultural analysis that traces the artistic, symbolic, and material progress of black and red ink from Chinese calligraphic traditions to contemporary Pakistani calligraphy. Addressing this problem is essential for enriching contemporary discourse on calligraphic practices.

#### **4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

**Objectives of the study are:**

1. To examine the usage of black and red ink used in early Chinese calligraphy.
2. To examine how these ink practices were adopted by Central Asian and Islamic traditions.
3. To investigate the transformation of red and black inks in post-independence Pakistani calligraphy.
4. To study how modern material and textures revived historical ink traditions in contemporary art practices.

#### **5. METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design:**

This article based on qualitative and comparative analysis research design, observing the journey of black and red ink starting from early China traditions to modern Pakistani calligraphic art. The research further follow proper sequence and explained the work of artists in thematic is design in a sequential and thematic way. The main purpose is to understand the link between two cultural inspirations. The data collection process designed and explained through steps to clear and understand the concepts inside the calligraphic practices.

**Step 1:** The first step observed Chinese calligraphy through in-depth thematic analysis. The focuses are given to understand the colors, patterns, textures, lines, spacing, strokes, and symbolism inside the writing.

**Step 2:** The next step analyzed adaptation of black and red ink within Central Asian and Islamic manuscript traditions. For this the work of Persian and Central Asian manuscripts are closely examined and compared with Chinese ink works from different angle like its text, ornamentation, spiritual emphasis and especially its Qur'anic and literary manuscripts.

**Step 3:** Third step is to investigate the inspirational themes taken from Chinese calligraphic traditions and its influence on Post-Pakistani then on contemporary calligraphers. The study examines how historical ink traditions are transformed through modern textures, medias, and experimental surfaces maintaining their symbolic continuity.

Overall, this methodology enables a cross-cultural understanding of ink both as material and conceptual medium, enlightening its developing role in shaping calligraphic expression across time and geography.

## **6. FROM CENTRAL ASIAN TRADITIONS TO CONTEMPORARY PAKISTANI CALLIGRAPHERS**

### **6.1. Ink Traditions in Pakistan**

#### **Mughal Legacy and Ink Practices**

These days, Pakistani calligraphy blends Islamic script heritage, Mughal aesthetics, and international creative influences, including subtle but significant influences from East Asian (particularly Chinese) brushwork traditions. A unique Pakistani style that combines religious devotion with expressive modernism was inspired by the journey from Chinese black-and-purple ink techniques through Central Asian versions into the Indian subcontinent.

When the Mughals arrived in India (1526), they transported Persian calligraphers and manuscript culture, the Mughal legacy in terms of art, calligraphy, and ink practices is a rich confluence of Persian , central Asian and Indian traditions.

- **Influence and development**
  - Mughal had a turco-mongol origin and they were the ones who brought the Persian culture with them.
  - Emperors like Akbar, Jahangir and shah Jahan flourished art and calligraphy.
  - The court patronized all the rising Persian calligraphers, Indian origin artists and the manuscript illustrators (Beach, 1992; Goswamy, 2012) .
  
- Ink and calligraphy
  - It is rooted in Persian Nastaliq script but has developed distinct regional styles.
  - Mughal inks were typically made from soot (for black ink), cinnabar or vermilion (for red ink ) and plant based and metallic additives for the durability and the gloss.
  
- Aesthetic philosophy
  - Mughal manuscripts combined the texts and miniature painting.
  - Ink as a medium was not just for communication but was also a source of spiritual and artistic expression.

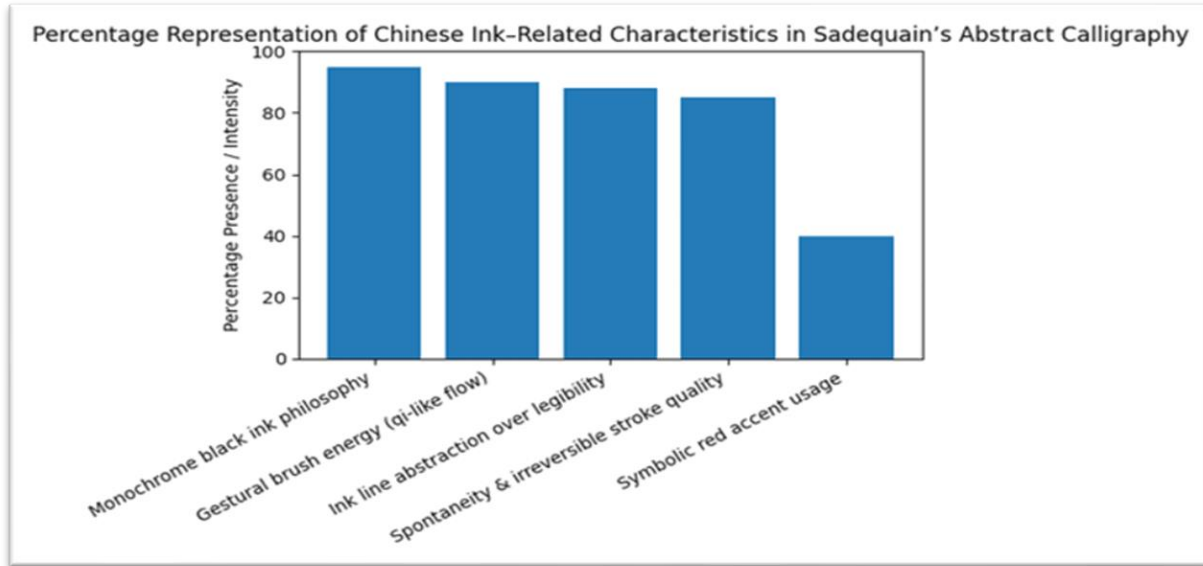
## **6.2. POST-INDEPENDENCE PAKISTANI CALLIGRAPHY**

In Pakistan, calligraphy emerged as a powerful symbol of Islamic and national identity after 1947. By the middle of the 20th century, some artists began using freer, more expansive painting strokes that resembled Chinese language brush calligraphy, but early practitioners frequently looked to Persian masters for inspiration.

### **6.2.1. SADEQUAIN (1930–1987): EXPRESSIONISM IN INK**

. Sadequain transformed Pakistani calligraphy by fusing traditional Nasta'liq and Kufic characters with brushstrokes that resembled East Asian ink paintings. Sadequain, full name was Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi, was a well-known Pakistani artist, a calligrapher, designer and poet (Naqvi, 1998; Hashmi, 2003). He was specialized in transforming traditional Islamic calligraphy into modern, vibrant, abstract art work. He showed his talent in form of wall size murals, and paintings become one of Pakistan's most significant modern artist (Iqbal, 2004).

- Dominance of black ink: His bold black brushstrokes exuded movement and vitality.
- Red accents: Used sparingly to create drama and emphasis.
- Connection to the Chinese language: Despite being self-taught, his brush control and fluidity are similar to Chinese cursive writing (caoshu) (Pl:5).



Graph: 1. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

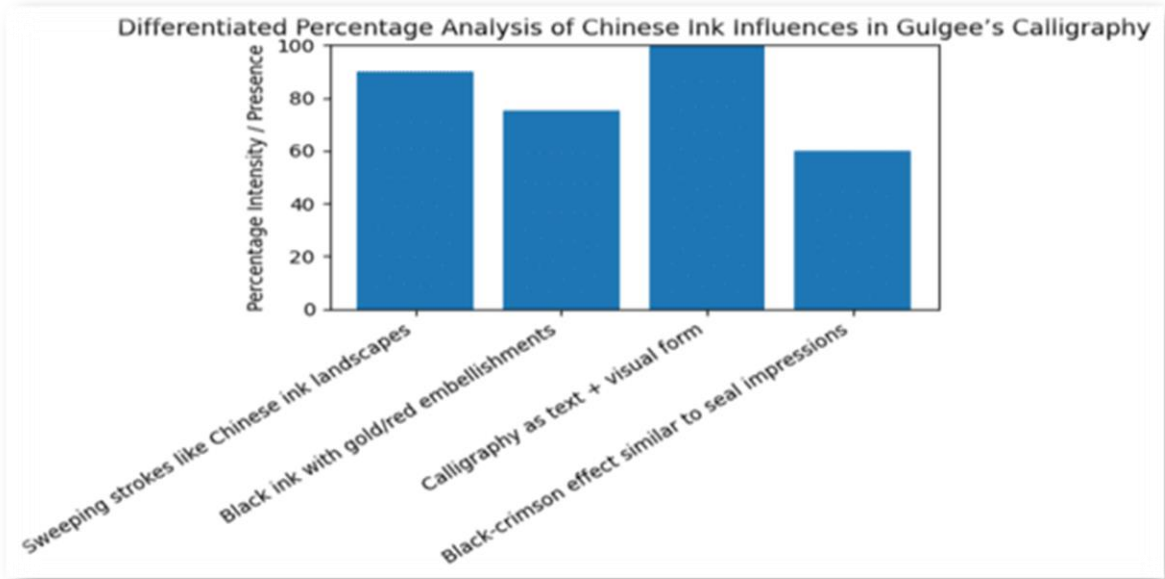
### 6.2.2. Ismail Gulgee (1926–2007): Gestural Abstraction

Ismail Gulgee was born in Peshawar. He received early education from Lawrence College and went to Aligarh University ,then Columbia , and finally Harvard University for his higher education. He was a portraits painter, abstract paintings artist and later on started to work on Islamic calligraphy. He win many national and international awards while painting several leaders portraits. Some best works including US Presidents Jimmy Carter , the Shah of Iran, King Hussein from Jordan, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and Pakistani leaders such as Zulifqar Ali Bhutto and General Ayub Khan.

Gulgee as an abstract calligrapher used broad, sweeping strokes that resembled Chinese ink landscapes.

- Used red or gold decorations in black ink.
- Considered calligraphy to be both form and content; letters are now visual rhythms.

- In certain pieces, the black-crimson evaluation resembles traditional artwork's Chinese language seal impressions (Pl:6).



Graph: 2. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

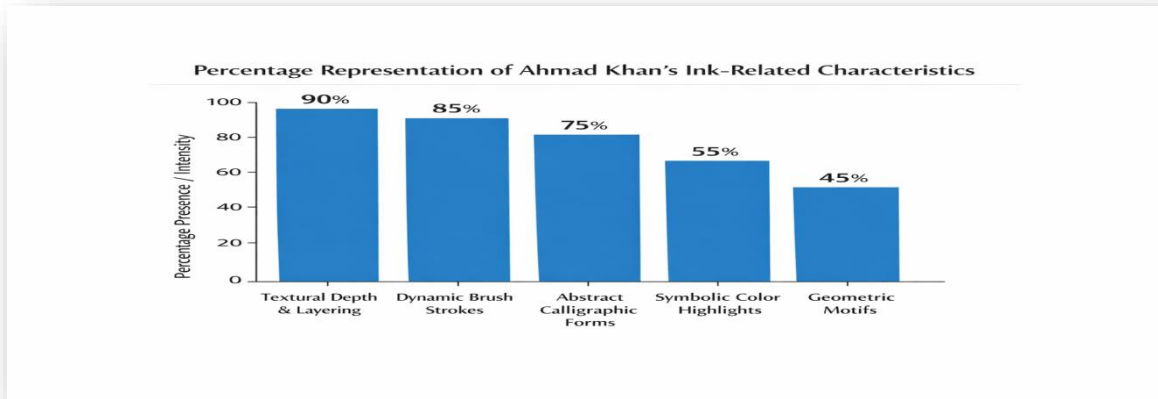
### 6.2.3. Ahmed Khan: Contemporary Fusion

Ahmed Khan is renowned for combining layered calligraphy with textured backgrounds; he frequently uses vibrant red to accent important words or heavenly names and deep black for the letters. Ahmed Khan is a contemporary painter, often using silver foil and chemical reactions to create textures and spirituality in his works. He is graduate of the National College of Arts at Lahore and famous to convert 2 dimensional elements in three dimensional surfaces on canvas.

#### Specialties

- He occasionally incorporates compositions that resemble vertical scrolls, which are evocative of Chinese hanging scrolls.
- In Islamic art, red is associated with divine emphasis, whereas in Chinese tradition, it is associated with power and sacredness (Pl:7).

Parallel to contemporary Chinese calligraphers, Pakistani calligraphers are now blending traditional forms with mix media techniques not merely using that typical inks, but reviewing those impressions with new material as source of inspiration in their work (Pl:8).



Graph: 3. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

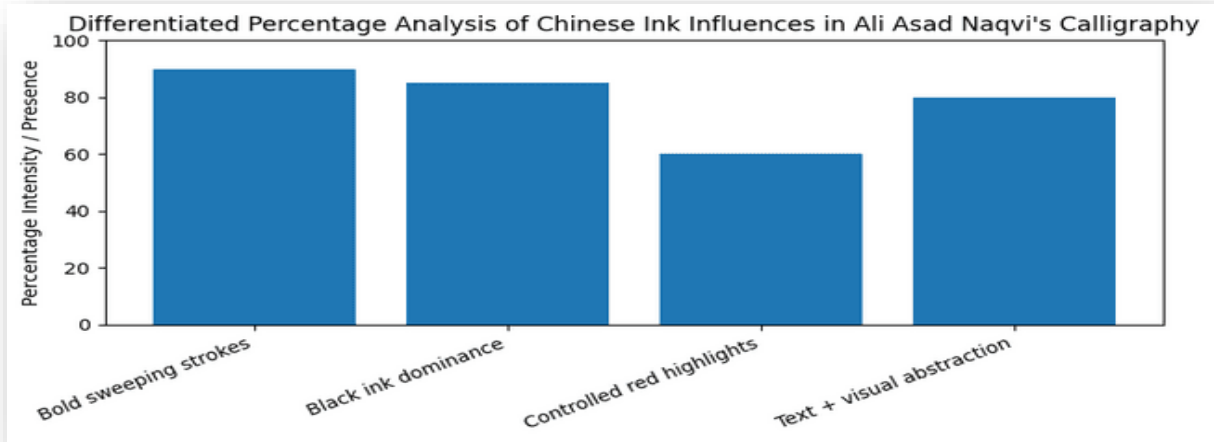
### 6.3. MODERN PAKISTANI CALLIGRAPHERS EXPERIMENTING THESE TRADITIONAL INKS

Some of the innovative Calligraphers are:

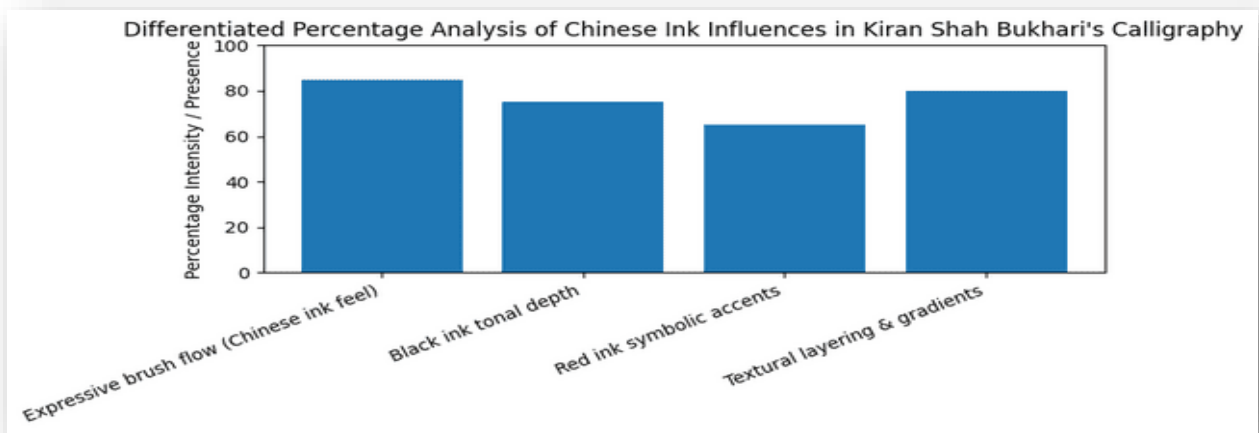
#### 6.3.1. Kiran Shah Bukhari

Also known as Kiran Shah Bee, born in Bannu, Pakistan. This young modern calligraphy artist mixing classical scripts with communicative textures, gradients, and methods that could pair well with brush and ink approaches (Pl.9). Her calligraphic practice she draws are mostly inspired from traditional styles including *Thuluth*, *Kufic*, *Naskh* and *Diwani* blending old in modern art works. Below graph shows how Kiran used black and red as inspirational colors with her modern color pallet. Her specialties are Acrylics, synthetic inks, mixed media on canvas & paper, digital

enhancement ( Graph: 1)



Graph: 3. representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

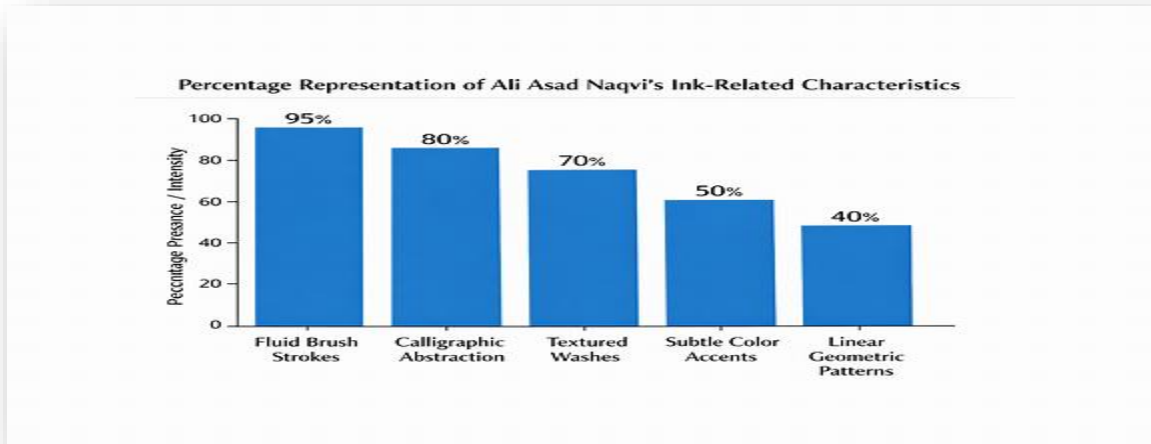


Graph: 4. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

### 6.3.2. Ali Asad Naqvi

Asad Naqvi belongs to Lahore, known for his bold, modern alignments in calligraphy that mix media and styles, making him a good applicant for exploring Chinese ink.

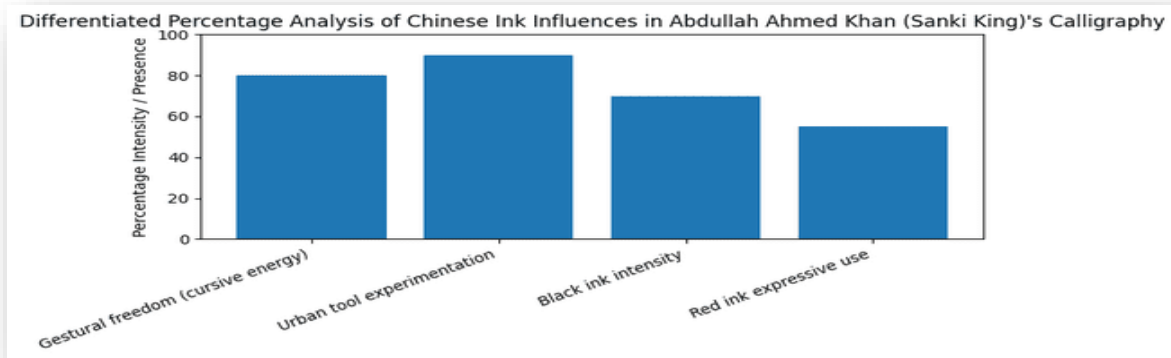
He is master in Acrylic paint, ink, gold leaf, canvas, textured surfaces, spray work, acrylics and paper calligraphist (Pl:10).



Graph: 5. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

### 6.3.3. Abdullah Ahmed Khan (Sanki King)

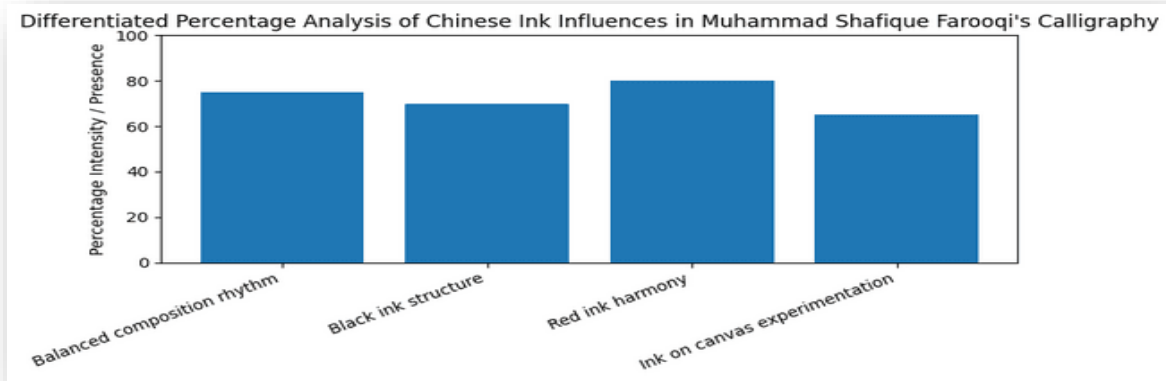
He is one of Contemporary artists, mixing calligraphy with urban art (calligraffiti). He was born in Jeddah, that's why his work blends elements of both traditional Arabic with Urdu script . He works freely to use medias and his method is experimental than non-traditional tools (Pl: 11).



Graph: 6. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

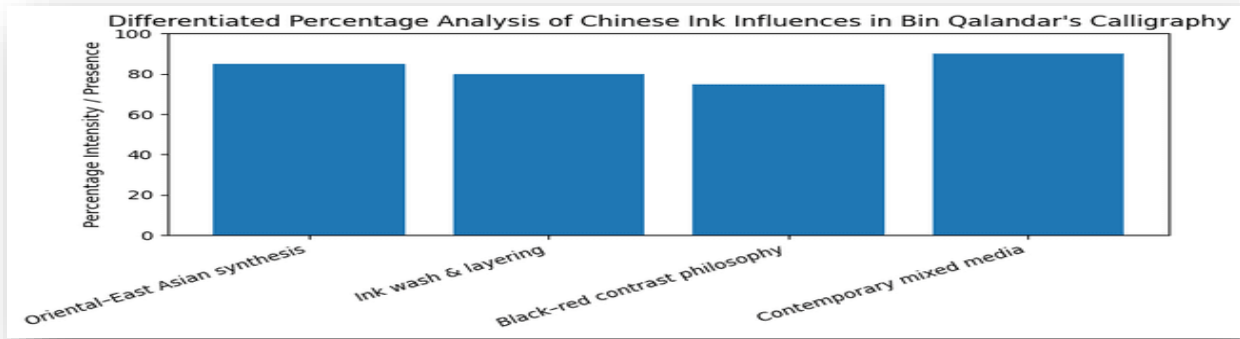
#### 6.3.4. Muhammad Shafique Farooqi

The renewed Pakistani artist Muhammad Shafique Farooqi was born in Sialkot in 1942, Pakistan. He get his early education from Istanbul University. He is an emerging calligraphic



Graph: 7. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form artist, usually deals dynamic compositions and harmonies of colors. He did several exhibitions in countries England, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Germany, Sudan, France, Canada, Holland, Turkey, Azerbaijan and many national award winners in Pakistan. He is also expert to use Medias such as Ink on paper, watercolor washes, acrylic, and canvas. Besides he is master in sketching free hand calligraphy and to convert that in abstract painting (PI: 12).

6.3.5. Bin Qalandar : Bin Qalandar is one of the Pakistani modern artist whose speciality is to convert oriental calligraphy into modern art work .His majority of work shows inspiration from East Asian calligraphy traditions. His specialty includes Ink, acrylic, gold leaf, canvas, paper; large-scale installations. acrylic, silver leaf, and mixed media First he was trained in fine arts and in miniature paintings but later on he start converting traditional Islamic calligraphy into modern abstract works creating layers



. Graph: 8. Representing the abstract calligraphic styles reveals adopted parameters in percentage form

## 10. Conclusion

The combination of black and red ink has evolved over ages and continents to represent universal human values expression, individuality, and continuity beyond simple aesthetic preference. These hues, which have their roots in long-standing artistic traditions, have functioned as symbols of identity and passion, uniting various nations via the common language of art. The works of modern calligraphers and abstract painters in Pakistan, who adapt traditional methods for contemporary audiences, bear witness to this lasting legacy. Their designs combine expressive abstraction with controlled calligraphic strokes, fusing innovation and tradition. They give ink art fresh life while maintaining its spiritual and cultural depth through this confluence. Every brushstroke turns into a conversation between the past and the present, illustrating how modern creative minds are still motivated by age-old ideas of harmony and balance. In addition to demonstrating the tenacity of cultural identity, the flexibility of tradition, and the ability of visual language to bring generations together across changing geographical and temporal landscapes, the development of ink art in Pakistan is a monument to humanity's enduring quest for beauty, meaning, and artistic freedom.

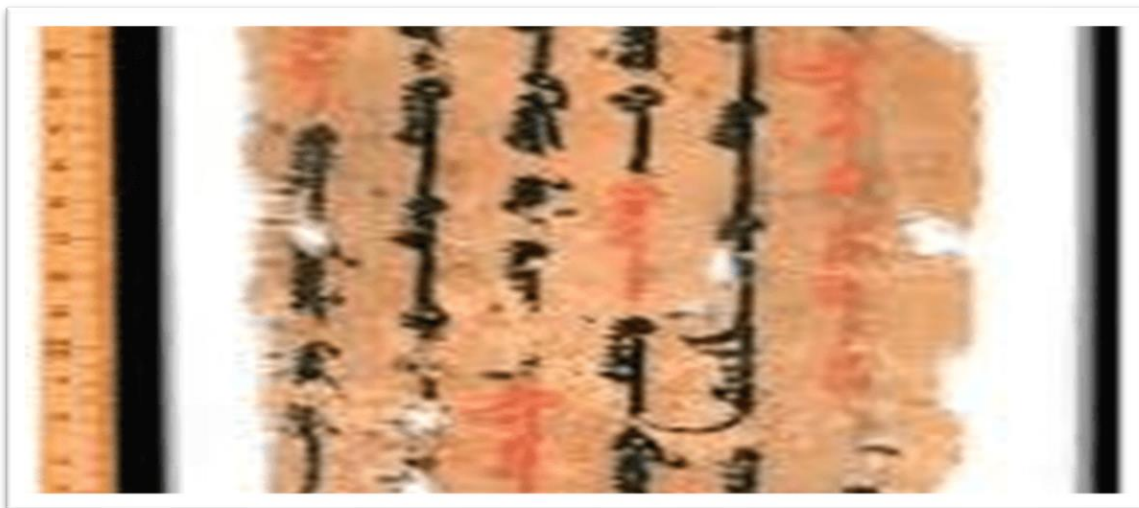
PLATES

**Figure 1 – Tang Dynasty Sutra with Red Annotations**



*Source 1: Dunhuang Manuscript, c. 8th century CE – black text with red phonetic marks*

**Figure 2 – Sogdian Manuscript with Black and Red Ink**



.Source2: Manuscript fragment from Turfan, showing influence of Chinese annotation practices.

**Figure 3 – Central Asian Qur’anic Page with Red Annotations**



Source 3: Qur’anic manuscript, c. 11th century, black main text with red vowel annotations

**Figure 4 – Mughal Farman in Black and Red Ink**



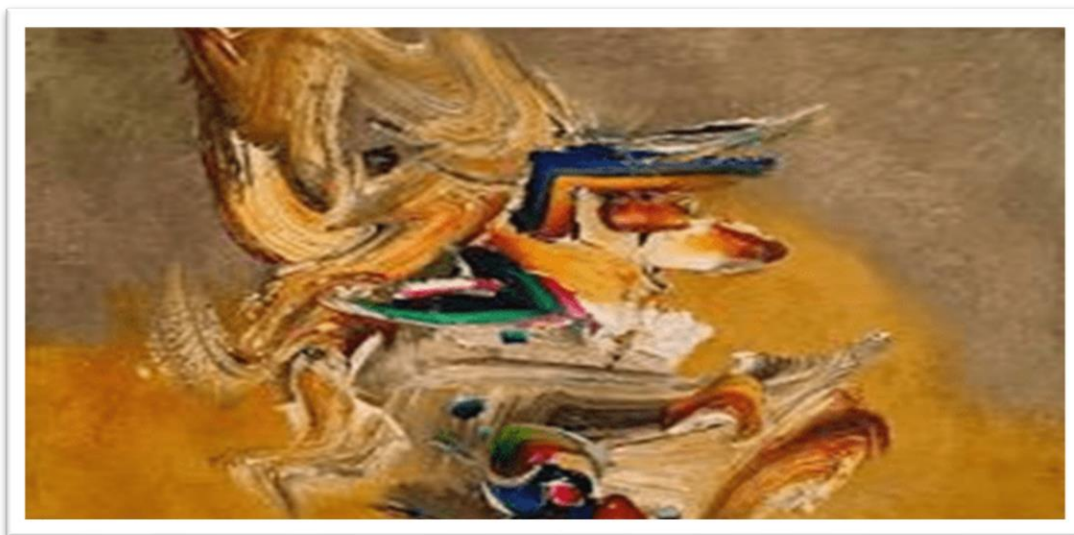
Source 4: Imperial decree (farman) from the Mughal court with black script and red seal impressions.

**Figure 5 – Sadequain Calligraphy**



Source 5: Sadequain’s dynamic black ink script with subtle red highlights

**Figure 6 – Gulgee Abstract Ink Work**



Source 6: Gulgee’s abstract calligraphic composition with black ink as dominant medium.

**Figure 7 – Ahmed Khan Mixed Media Calligraphy**



*Source 7: Ahmed Khan's layered work with black text and red highlights*

**Figure 8 – Contemporary Pakistani Ink Installation**



*Source 8: Modern mixed-media calligraphy installation using black & red contrast.*

Figure 9- Darbar Scene



Source 9- [https://www.saatchiart.com/art/Painting-Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-ArRahim/2119661/9934623/view?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.saatchiart.com/art/Painting-Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-ArRahim/2119661/9934623/view?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

Figure 10: S. M. Naqvi, 36 x 48 Inch, Acrylic on Canvas, Abstract



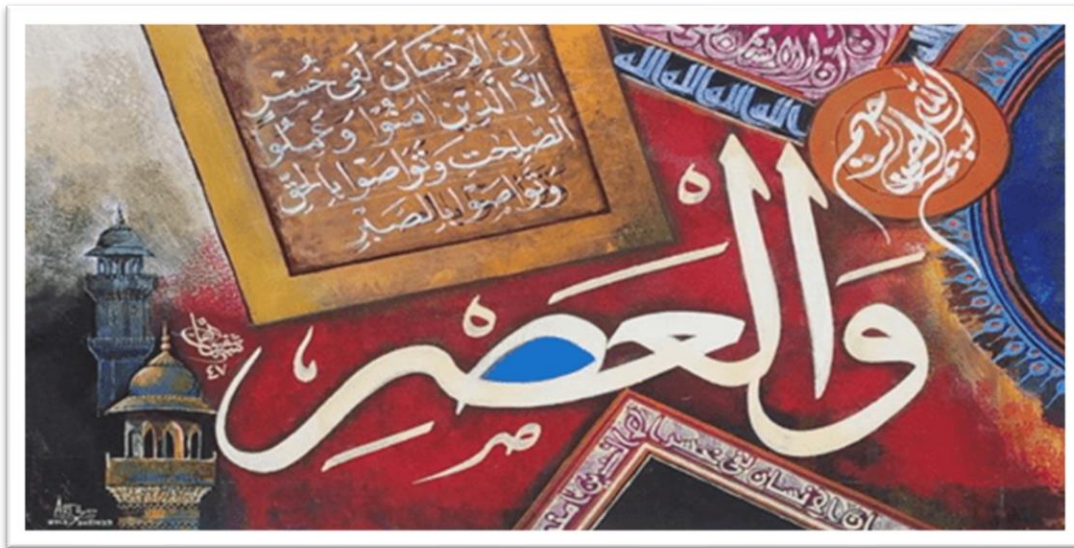
Source 10- [https://www.instagram.com/aliasadnaqvi/?hl=en&utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.instagram.com/aliasadnaqvi/?hl=en&utm_source=chatgpt.com)

Figure 11: Wall Graphite



Source 11: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanki\\_King?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanki_King?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

Figure: 12 Quranic Calligraphy



Source 12:  
[https://www.saatchiart.com/paintings/pakistan?srsItd=AfmBOopkZBPfSKdwy2JL4hzXMmdilz p-gB0lwgZIMBFo1TEPTjJg4M-r&utm\\_source=chatgpt](https://www.saatchiart.com/paintings/pakistan?srsItd=AfmBOopkZBPfSKdwy2JL4hzXMmdilz p-gB0lwgZIMBFo1TEPTjJg4M-r&utm_source=chatgpt)

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