

## Article

# When Pursuing the Extraordinary, Remain Ordinary —An Exploration of the Aesthetic Logic Behind Liu Hongbiao's Wild Cursive Calligraphy

Liang Zhining<sup>1\*</sup>, Shangguan Wenjin<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Literature, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu 610068, Sichuan, China; ning25@163.com<sup>2</sup> Institute of Taoist and Religious Culture, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610064, Sichuan, China; [vinkinshangguan@stu.sicnu.edu.cn](mailto:vinkinshangguan@stu.sicnu.edu.cn)

\*Correspondence: ning25@163.com

Received: 14 February 2026 / Accepted: 27 March 2026 / Published: 28 March 2026

**Abstract:** Liu Hongbiao stands as a seminal figure in the contemporary calligraphy scene, emblematic of the modern transformation of traditional calligraphic art. His artistic practice and theoretical framework embody a creative synthesis that is deeply rooted in tradition while actively engaging with contemporaneity. Guided by the principle of "antiquity in structure, modernity in form" and underpinned by a dialectical philosophy, Liu has redefined the aesthetic paradigm of wild cursive script. Demonstrating a profound mastery of classical brushwork, character structure, and rhythmic vitality, he has pioneered innovations in large-format wild cursive while adhering to orthodox principles. By integrating dialectical thinking into his practice, he has engendered a new expressive rhythm imbued with artistic tension and the spirit of the era. Furthermore, Liu amalgamates the cultural heritage of Jiangyou with his personal nostalgia to forge a regionally inflected calligraphy, thereby linking the art form to both historical memory and individual sentiment. Ultimately, his wild cursive calligraphy offers a compelling paradigm for understanding the potential trajectory of traditional calligraphy within a contemporary context.

**Keywords:** Liu Hongbiao; Wild Cursive Script; Calligraphy Aesthetics; Pingxiang Calligrapher

## 1. Introduction

Liu Hongbiao (1954-2024), courtesy name Houyi, art name Niban Zhai, was a native of Pingxiang, Jiangxi Province, and a preeminent contemporary cursive calligrapher in China who held important positions in the field of calligraphic art. Renowned for his wild cursive calligraphy, his works were exhibited in numerous high-profile exhibitions at home and abroad, winning many awards, and he was named one of the "Top Ten Annual Figures in Chinese Calligraphy" in 2010 ( "ShuFa" ,2011) . In the contemporary calligraphy circle, Liu Hongbiao has become an iconic figure in the modern transformation of traditional calligraphic art through practices such as the "Four Masters of Wild Cursive Calligraphy Exhibition". Launched in 2016, this exhibition has been held annually, embodying the prosperity and vitality of contemporary Chinese calligraphy. The other three participating calligraphers were Hu Kangmei, Zhang Xuguang and Wang Houxiang. Like Liu Hongbiao, these three artists have actively explored expressing the artist's inner spirit through wild cursive calligraphy and strived to infuse the spirit of the times into their works. As Hu Kangmei said, "Calligraphy also needs to pursue a new look, and it can only develop through controversy and exploration." (Kang & Wu, 2019) This has

---

always been the innovation in calligraphic forms that Liu Hongbiao pursued. Endowed with superb skills, Liu Hongbiao also engaged in vigorous theoretical reflections on calligraphy. Especially in his later years, he kept discovering new problems and putting forward new viewpoints, such as "ancient characters in essence, novel forms in expression", "ornamented calligraphy" and "integration of literature and ink"(Liu, 2020), which integrate traditional calligraphic art with the spirit of the times and expand the aesthetic expression of cursive calligraphy in the contemporary era. In addition, Liu Hongbiao also paid attention to the exhibition planning and education of calligraphic art.

## **2. Literature Review/Background**

Academic research on Liu Hongbiao's calligraphic creation and his theories remains scarce. He Wenjian(2024) commented that "there have been numerous artists creating large character calligraphy since ancient times, yet the creation of wild cursive calligraphy with a small number of characters began with modern people! In today's China, Liu Hongbiao is the most outstanding in this genre, having truly grasped the subtle essence of calligraphy."(para. 12) It is true that Liu Hongbiao had no family inheritance, no formal academic training, and no personal mentors. Through decades of self-study and reflection, he developed a systematic view of calligraphy. It can be said that research on such a contemporary calligrapher who is self-taught yet essentially learned from the ancients is far from sufficient. In response to this, this paper focuses on Liu Hongbiao's calligraphic practice and theoretical reflections to elaborate on three aspects of the aesthetic logic of his calligraphy.

## **3.Upholding Orthodoxy and Pursuing Innovation: Artistic Consciousness Rooted in the Tradition of Calligraphy**

Liu Hongbiao's creation of wild cursive calligraphy is deeply rooted in the traditional soil of calligraphy, and he has repeatedly mentioned the importance of copying in the process of learning calligraphy in his articles. In his essay *New Remarks on Calligraphy*, Liu Hongbiao (2012) argued that "one must learn calligraphy from the ancients"(para. 7), and the closer one's calligraphy is to that of the ancients, the more refined, appealing and connotative it becomes. Yet he was not confined by calligraphic tradition; instead, he actively sought paths of innovation to reconstruct the contemporary connotation of wild cursive calligraphy. Liu Hongbiao (2012) pointed out that "brush and ink should keep pace with the times, which does not mean focusing merely on form while neglecting connotation, brush and ink skills, or the learning and inheritance of the ancients." (para. 4) This viewpoint is also reflected in his calligraphic creation. Liu Hongbiao's cursive works are no longer "small characters on small scrolls" but "large-scale masterpieces" full of visual tension. This transformation not only changes the physical scale of the works but also reconstructs the spatial expression and visual impact of calligraphy. In Liu Hongbiao's view, for thousands of years, the practical function of ancient calligraphy has always been the primary one, with aesthetics merely serving as an added value. The ancients never held calligraphy exhibitions, and when writing, they did not deliberately consider artistic form, the overall appearance or visual impact. Contemporary calligraphy, however, has transformed into pure artistic creation, which inevitably requires creators to devote more energy to formal exploration.

Wild cursive calligraphy is the most expressive script among cursive calligraphies, renowned for its continuous brush momentum and varied character forms. In the creation of wild cursive calligraphy, "boldness" (狂) and "steadiness" (穩), "unfetteredness" (放) and "restraint" (收) are contradictory yet unified. On the one hand, it is necessary to demonstrate the bold, unrestrained and magnificent momentum of wild cursive calligraphy, with lines galloping like steed horses and surging like dragons emerging from the sea, free from restraint. On the

other hand, it is essential to maintain an inherent order and stability amidst such freedom and unrestraint to avoid the work falling into chaos and disorder. Through the deconstructive inheritance of classic works, Liu Hongbiao skillfully constructed a new tension between the two. In the processing of character forms, he boldly exaggerated and enlarged the characters, and at the same time added explanatory regular script annotations in red seal script beside the cursive characters, creating a strong visual contrast. Nevertheless, through ingenious spatial arrangement and color contrast, the entire work maintains harmony and unity amidst changes, achieving the balance of the calligraphic work.



**Figure 1.** Five-Character Couplet in Cursive Script: "When pursuing the extraordinary, remain ordinary", Liu Hongbiao

In artistic expression, Liu Hongbiao's wild cursive works have also achieved new development. He broke through the constraints of the traditional artistic paradigm of wild cursive calligraphy and integrated modern aesthetic concepts into it, making the works not only possess traditional lingering charm but also full of the spirit of the times. His works both inherit and carry forward the spirit of traditional culture and pay attention to and reflect contemporary social life and people's spiritual world, bringing a brand-new aesthetic experience to the audience. Huang Jun commented on Liu Hongbiao's cursive creation, pointing out that his works feature diverse styles and a strong sense of form: some are simple and slender with concise brushwork, presenting an overall sparse and vigorous feeling; others are bold and unrestrained with free and unfettered strokes, with brushwork advancing with perseverance amidst difficulty. Such stylistic diversity precisely reflects the in-depth thinking in Liu Hongbiao's creative philosophy—that calligraphy should be the expression of one's inner spirit and the materialization of emotions. Cui Shuqiang(2023) noted that "inner spirit is more important than form... A calligrapher must possess a certain inner spirit and unique reflections on the world and life, and it is to express his profound feelings about the world that he needs to seek new forms." (para. 7) Liu Hongbiao's innovative inheritance of tradition is no longer a

---

simple inheritance of the ancients' techniques and forms, but an in-depth reflection on the expressive forms of calligraphy, the inherent laws and spiritual connotations behind the works, and a reinterpretation and innovation combined with the aesthetic needs and characteristics of the times of contemporary people. This logic of upholding orthodoxy and pursuing innovation is exactly reflected in the couplet created by Liu Hongbiao himself: "When pursuing the extraordinary, remain ordinary."

#### 4. Rationality and Perceptuality: Dialectical Aesthetics in Cursive Calligraphy Creation

In Liu Hongbiao's theoretical system, dialectics occupies a core position. He held that "brushwork, ink technique, character structure and composition are the basic principles of calligraphy. The higher level of calligraphy should be dialectics." (Liu, 2017, para.3) This means that the endless changes in cursive works, such as large and small, thick and thin, long and short, wide and narrow, upright and slanting, fast and slow, dense and light ink, wet and dry strokes, sparse and dense layout, solid and empty space, open and closed composition, connected and broken lines, are all two sides of contradictions that need to be treated dialectically. As a script that is closest to the essence of art and the most expressive of emotions and ideas, cursive calligraphy requires philosophical thinking in its creation, as well as the ability to create contradictions, resolve them and achieve balance. Therefore, Liu Hongbiao emphasized the creative state of "perceptual writing under rational control" and put forward a series of dialectical relationships, such as writing and calligraphic art, abiding by the rules and being conservative, rigor and constrained. The series of theories proposed by Liu Hongbiao also represents a modern innovation of the "artistic conception" in traditional calligraphy. This dialectical thinking breaks the relatively uniform rhythmic distribution of traditional calligraphy, creates a strong visual contrast and dynamic balance, and forms a new artistic conception in line with contemporary aesthetics and full of tension. The creative concept of "ancient characters in essence, novel forms in expression"(字古式新) is the best proof of Liu Hongbiao's application of dialectical thinking. For example, in his work Yun Mi (Clouds Pervade), the brush momentum alternates between rapid and slow, the ink color contrasts between dense and light, and the two characters are in different statures—one plump and one slender, making the paper present an interplay of solid and empty space and creating a tremendous visual impact.



Figure 2. Square-Format Cursive Script: "Yun Mi (Clouds Pervade)", Liu Hongbiao

Table 1 The Aesthetic Structure of Liu Hongbiao's "Ancient Characters in Essence, Novel Forms in Expression (字古式新)"

---

<b>Theoretical Dimension</b>	<b>Aesthetic Connotation</b>	<b>Aesthetic Expression</b>
Ancient Characters in Essence	Deeply rooted in tradition, integrating the strengths of various schools	Copying stone inscriptions and calligraphy models, integrating diverse calligraphic styles, strictly abiding by the rules of cursive calligraphy
Novel Forms in Expression	Formal innovation, the spirit of the times	Creating new work forms, innovating the exhibition methods of modern calligraphy

Liu Hongbiao proposed the "five transformations" of contemporary calligraphy: the transformation from practical function to aesthetic function, from small characters on small scrolls to large-scale masterpieces, from finger and wrist movement to shoulder and elbow movement, from desk reading to hall display, and from literal comprehension to emotional expression. These transformations not only summarize the evolutionary trend of calligraphy in the contemporary era but also provide theoretical guidance for the development of calligraphic art. They point out the changes in the expressive forms and creative expression of calligraphic art in contemporary aesthetics.

First of all, as an independent visual art, the core value of contemporary calligraphy has transformed into pure aesthetic and emotional expression. Liu Hongbiao emphasized that contemporary calligraphers should no longer be mere copyists but artists who express their personal emotions through brush and ink. This is the most profound essential change among the five transformations. The core of calligraphy has shifted from the readability of "what to write" to the expressiveness of "how to write" and "why to write in this way". The role of calligraphers has also changed from "document copyists" to emotional expressers and artistic conception constructors. Liu Hongbiao particularly pointed out that cursive calligraphy has ushered in its best period of development in the contemporary era precisely because its form and rhythm are most in line with the "high-speed and fast-paced social form" of modern people, facilitating artists to "express their emotions and release themselves to the full". Therefore, Liu Hongbiao proposed "rational control and perceptual writing", which also indicates that formal innovation for expressing personal emotions is the development direction of contemporary calligraphy. As Fan Cungan(2014) pointed out, "While expressing beauty, calligraphic art attaches more importance to expressing life attitude and personality spirit, which is also the uniqueness of the aesthetic of Chinese calligraphic art."(para.8) On this basis, Liu Hongbiao pointed out the specific dimensions for innovation after inheriting the tradition—from form, scale and techniques to exhibition methods and aesthetic pursuit. Modern calligraphy mainly serves exhibition halls with larger work sizes, which require corresponding adjustments in form. Calligraphers need to strengthen the visual tension and overall momentum of calligraphy to adapt to the exhibition space of modern art museums. The change in scale directly leads to the adjustment of writing techniques. Firstly, writing small characters mainly uses finger and wrist strength, pursuing subtlety and delicacy. Creating large-scale works, however, requires mobilizing the strength of the shoulders, elbows and even the whole body with a larger range of movement. This makes writing a holistic artistic act, and the lines are thus more full of strength and rhythmic changes. Secondly, the way of appreciation has changed from looking down and reading carefully at the desk to looking straight or up in the exhibition hall. This not only

---

changes the spatial relationship between the audience and the works but also elevates the artistic status of calligraphy—it needs to be "admired" and examined as a complete work of art. Based on this, Liu Hongbiao put forward the exhibition concept of "dressing calligraphy in splendor and letting calligraphy live in a villa", emphasizing that through elaborate mounting design and sparse exhibition layout, each work can display its charm in a comfortable and respectful environment. The concept of "ornamented calligraphy" is integrated into his works. For example, in his calligraphy of Gao Qi's poems, despite the large size, the composition is carefully arranged with alternating sparse and dense character structures, smooth and varied lines, presenting a strong visual impact on the whole and demonstrating the vitality and charm of cursive calligraphy.

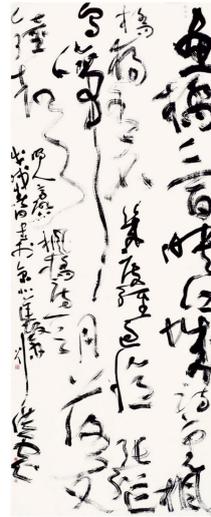


Figure 3. Gao Qi's Poem in Cursive Script, Liu Hongbiao



Figure 4. Five-Character Couplet in Cursive Script, Liu Hongbiao

In addition, "novel forms in expression" refers not only to innovation in expression and form but also to "novelty" in writing content, as Liu Hongbiao pointed out that "brush and ink should keep pace with the times". In terms of writing content, Liu Hongbiao realized the transformation from copying to original creation. He insisted on "writing one's own poems and essays, expressing one's own heartfelt feelings", and for more than 30 years, all works in his personal exhibitions used self-composed poems and essays. This makes the textual content and ink form

---

of the calligraphic works a true expression of his inner spirit, demonstrating his mastery of both "literary temperament" and "artistic quality", and reflecting the true expression of modern individuals. In his "Reading the World and Understanding People: Liu Hongbiao's Calligraphy Exhibition for His 60th Birthday", the works cover various sections such as "poetry drafts", "couplets", "greetings", "text messages" and "literary comments". These works record his life trajectory and social interactions, showing the innovation of the "artistic conception" of traditional calligraphy, drawing the audience back to the real scenes of contemporary life and making the "artistic conception" carry the emotional experience and life marks of modern people.

## **5. Individual and Region: The Artistic Expression of Nostalgia and Cultural Connotation**

The aesthetic character of Liu Hongbiao's calligraphic art has a profound internal connection with his deep cultural genes of Jiangyou and the geographical cultural heritage of Pingxiang. Based on the geography of calligraphy, as a visual art, calligraphy has a unique advantage in recording and inheriting local history. China has a vast territory, and the lifestyles and cultural traditions of different regions have a profound impact on the creation of artists. Liu Genhuo(2011) pointed out that "regional calligraphic styles should be the aesthetic cultural atmosphere in which calligraphers in a certain region express their reverence for the beauty of Chinese characters and Chinese character culture through the same or similar ways of writing Chinese characters... The cultural and ecological environment of the region where a calligrapher lives has a long-term impact on both the calligrapher's character, emotions and thoughts and the expression of the cultural connotation of calligraphy... This influence is endowed with a broad sense of cultural concepts."(para.2) Located in the west of Jiangxi Province, Pingxiang has been deeply influenced by Jiangyou culture for a long time. Historically, Jiangxi was a cultural hub with numerous academies and a prosperous imperial examination system, serving as an important stronghold of Neo-Confucianism and the Philosophy of the Mind. The core of Jiangyou culture—"literary grace and moral integrity"—has also profoundly influenced the calligraphic styles of Pingxiang calligraphers, who pursue both subtle brush and ink skills and the expression of natural individuality. The practical rationality of "applying learning to practical use" and the subjective spirit of "self-awareness of the inner spirit" in Jiangyou culture have jointly shaped Liu Hongbiao's calligraphic concept of upholding tradition and daring to innovate in his calligraphic thoughts. Through his creation, Liu Hongbiao has made calligraphy a carrier of Pingxiang's historical memory. The profound cultural heritage of Pingxiang has provided abundant nourishment for Liu Hongbiao's artistic creation. In his "Calligraphy of Ink and Nostalgia: Liu Hongbiao's Homecoming Calligraphy Exhibition", he skillfully integrated hometown elements into his artistic creation, realizing the visual reconstruction of historical memory.

In the section "Ancient Charms of Zhaoping", he selected and copied poems and essays about Pingxiang written by celebrities of all dynasties, enabling the audience to appreciate the extraordinary natural beauty and prosperous humanistic scene of ancient Pingxiang through calligraphy. This creative method combines local documents with calligraphic art, providing a vivid visual presentation of historical memory. In the section "Scenic Spots of Pingxiang", he adopted a new structure of large character calligraphy with small character annotations, introducing the important places and scenic spots of Pingxiang to the audience. This creative technique not only inherits the magnificent momentum of traditional large character calligraphy but also supplements geographical information through small character annotations, making calligraphy a medium for spreading local customs and features. For a wanderer who has been away from his hometown for a long time, calligraphy has become an important carrier for

---

Liu Hongbiao to express his nostalgic emotions. In the section "Anecdotes of the Hometown", he copied self-composed poems, couplets and text messages recalling hometown events and contacting relatives and friends, expressing his homesickness after living abroad for a long time and showing his emotions for his hometown and life memories with brush and ink.



**Figure 5.** Cursive Script: "Pingxiang", Liu Hongbiao

Liu Hongbiao's expression of nostalgia is not a simple reminiscence, but a sublimation of nostalgic emotions through the combination of personal emotions and the inheritance of local culture. Zeng Fanren(2017) believed that the spiritual beauty of calligraphy is deeply related to the "emotions" of the calligrapher it expresses, and artists express "emotions" through undulating and twisted lines and ink marks of varying density and thickness.(para.5) In Liu Hongbiao's calligraphic work Pingxiang, the character structure is broad and open with a magnificent momentum, the brushwork has a distinct rhythm, and the ink color features rich changes between dry and wet, dense and light, with small characters on the left as explanations. The entire work not only shows a heartfelt look back at his hometown but also expresses a positive and enterprising spirit. His homecoming calligraphy exhibition is both a summary of his personal artistic career and a contribution to the cultural construction of his hometown. Through the efforts of Liu Hongbiao and other calligraphers, Pingxiang calligraphy has become an important link connecting tradition and modernity, the individual and the hometown, art and life. Liu Hongbiao's artistic achievements have had a profound impact on the development of Pingxiang calligraphy. In recent years, Pingxiang has continued to hold various calligraphy activities, such as the "12th Jiangxi Provincial Youth Calligraphy Exhibition" held in Pingxiang in August 2025. Through this exhibition, the artistic concepts and innovative spirit of Pingxiang-born calligraphers such as Liu Hongbiao are influencing a new generation of calligraphy creators, promoting the prosperity of Pingxiang calligraphy and the inheritance of culture. It can be said that Liu Hongbiao's practice of regional calligraphy reflects that the contemporary development of calligraphy not only requires a macroscopic vision that transcends regional limitations but also cannot do without an in-depth understanding and creative transformation of the cultural genes of specific regions, which is a new kind of cultural consciousness. On the basis of a deeply rooted calligraphic tradition, regional calligraphers have realized the aesthetic integration of individual artistic language and regional cultural characteristics through the contemporary reconstruction of local cultural heritage.

## **6. Conclusions**

---

Liu Hongbiao's artistic practice is an integration of traditional wild cursive calligraphy and contemporary culture, and an answer to the question of how calligraphic forms and artistic aesthetics develop in the contemporary context. Liu Hongbiao(2012) frankly stated that "the ancients have left us room for the development of calligraphy, and we must do our best to develop it. Even if we pile up a small mound or a hill beside the numerous peaks of calligraphy in history, even if we cannot keep pace with the predecessors, it is still a symbol of the calligraphic art of our era and a contribution to the history of calligraphy."(para.5) With solid traditional skills as the fulcrum, Liu Hongbiao, through multi-dimensional innovations in brushwork, structure and form, has transformed wild cursive calligraphy from a lyrical carrier on the desks of literati into a visual symbol of the spirit of the times, promoting the rejuvenation of calligraphy and the advent of a golden age of cursive calligraphy in the era. Through in-depth observation of contemporary aesthetics, Liu Hongbiao has continuously practiced his creative concept of "ancient characters in essence, novel forms in expression" and exerted a far-reaching influence. Jean-François Lyotard held that "modernity exists in the form of an impulse to transcend oneself". Liu Hongbiao's creative practice, especially his wild cursive and abstract series works, has to a certain extent transcended the "readability" of calligraphy, returning calligraphy to a pure visual language composed of lines, ink images and spatial composition. This creation is a contemporary response to Shi Tao's view that "brush and ink should keep pace with the times"—traditional media can not only carry classical artistic conception but also interpret modern spirit. Liu Hongbiao's road of innovating wild cursive calligraphy is essentially a dialogue between traditional calligraphic art and contemporary aesthetics, and this dialogue is precisely the proof of the eternal vitality of calligraphic art. In short, Liu Hongbiao is an "innovative theorist" who starts from calligraphic practice, attaches importance to dialectical thinking, and is committed to exploring the possibilities of the contemporary development of traditional calligraphy. Neither conservative nor blindly innovative, Liu Hongbiao seeks an aesthetic expression in line with the spirit of the times on the basis of a deep understanding of calligraphic tradition.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization and investigation, Liang Zhining and Shangguan Wenjin; writing—original draft preparation, Liang Zhining and Shangguan Wenjin; writing—review and editing, Liang Zhining; visualization, Liang Zhining; supervision, Shangguan Wenjin; funding acquisition, Shangguan Wenjin. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This paper is a research achievement of the project "Research on the Construction of Contemporary Literary and Artistic Aesthetics and Value Interpretation in Pingxiang", a support project of the Literary and Art Creation and Prosperity Project of the Federation of Literary and Art Circles of Pingxiang City.

## References

- Cui,S.(2023). The expressive spirit of cursive script and its contemporary value. *Chinese calligraphy*, 1 , 178-180+182.
- Fan,C.(2014). A Comprehensive Overview of Calligraphy Culture. *Chinese calligraphy*, 18 , 132-133.
- He,W.(2024). Shangqu's modern and bold calligraphy art ecosystem - from large-scale calligraphy to the evolution of short-form calligraphy. *Yihai*, 11 , 56-58.
- Kang,S.,&Wu,C.(2019). "Four Masters of Cursive Calligraphy Exhibition" Observations and Thoughts. *Chinese Calligraphy and Painting*, 12 , 100-102.
- Liu,H.(2012). Lun Shu Xin Yu. *Chinese calligraphy*, 8 , 22-28.
- Liu,H.(2017). Wan Shu Yi Xiang. *Chinese calligraphy*, 11 , 127-129.

---

Liu,H.(2020).*Ten Lectures on the Contemporary Image Construction of Calligraphy Art*. Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House.

Zeng,F.(2017). The Dance of the Pen's Life - An Overview of Calligraphy Aesthetics. *Literary criticism*, 5 , 28-36.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of IDAP and/or the editor(s). IDAP and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.