

Black Ink and White Paper: The Traditional Art of Chinese Calligraphy

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Shu fa, or "the way of writing," is an art deeply rooted in the long tradition of aesthetic beauty in Chinese culture. Chinese calligraphy remains a vibrant and practical art form that encompasses all of that country's history and culture. It can be appreciated by all audiences as a high art, but understanding its role in history and society allows a glimpse into China's past and its present.

According to ancient Chinese legend, the origin of writing began with the great sage Tsang Chieh. Due to his extraordinary powers, he was capable of seeing patterns in nature, such as in bird tracks and constellations. These patterns became the original Chinese characters written by the sage (Harrist & Wong, 1999). While this myth is just a whimsical tale, it illustrates the firm foundation of Chinese calligraphy's roots in aesthetic beauty. More than the simple depiction of words or ideas, *shu fa*, or "the way of writing," is a unique art form. In the words of calligrapher Yat-Ming Cathy Ho (2007), calligraphy "speaks to you and takes you across the centuries, embracing the whole of Chinese history and its culture" (p. 7).

Over four thousand years ago, the Chinese language began with a basic pictograph system, with individual symbols representing objects or ideas. Over time, the symbols became more stylized and numerous. Today, there are more than fifty thousand characters (Lai, 1973). Similar to the legend of the sage Tsang Chieh, many of the first script styles were described by the natural source they were inspired from. "Tadpole script" and "tiger script" are two examples of these styles fixed in natural imagery (Lai, 1973, p. xi). The earliest written records were carved on oracle bones and tortoise shells (Harrist & Wong, 1999). Later evidence from the transitional period during the third and fourth centuries reveals a transition from carving to brushwork, as writers used black ink on silk. Bamboo or wood strips were bound to form China's first books (Mote et al., 1989). In *Calligraphy and the East Asian Book*, Mote, Chu and, Goodman find that the standard writing materials used by calligraphers came into use during the Han Dynasty. The brush and ink had been "refined and improved" and paper replaced silk as the popular medium (Mote et al., 1989, p. 35). At the end of this period, new styles of calligraphy began to appear.

Originally, writing appeared in oracle-bone writing (*chia ku wen*) and seal script (*chuan shu*). Clerical script emerged a little later when the need for official records of state increased dramatically (Harrist & Wong, 1999). During the reign of the First Emperor of China, Chin Shih-huang-ti, script was standardized, a movement that took many years to fully take effect, but was nonetheless a great step (Harrist & Wong, 1999). At the close of the Han Dynasty, running script (*hsing*) and grass writing (*tsao*) became acceptable variations of cursive writing while the model script (*kai shu*) became the standardized chirography (Mote et al., 1989). This script was used as the basis for printing type and is still used today (Harrist & Wong, 1999). Because it is the clearest and most “rigid” in composition, it is the calligraphy taught to beginners (Lai, 1973, p. xiv).

The essential equipment for Chinese calligraphy is known as the Four Treasures: paper, ink, inkstone, and brushes. Paper comes in various types, such as Moon Palace, grass, and xuan. Ink usually comes in the form of an inkstick, which must be ground on an inkstone and mixed with water. Dozens of different kinds of brushes are used to produce varying effects. Sheep, goat, wolf, horse, and even mouse whiskers are used as bristles (Cherrett, 1997, p. 11-12). These treasures have been described in Wang His-chih’s work, *Madam Wei’s Calligraphic Strategy*: “The paper is the battle field/The brush is swords and spears/The ink is the hood and armor/The inkstone is the wall and moat...” (as cited in Lai, 1973, p. 246).

Chinese calligraphy differs from Western writing in many key areas. Western artists do not use a writing instrument to create art. Chinese calligraphers, however, use the same material as a Chinese painter. The script itself is “capable of a vast range of extension and variation, subject to the discipline of traditions and the inventiveness of personal styles, for which alphabetic scripts in the Western tradition offer no counterpart” (Mote et al., 1989, p. 6-7). While Chinese calligraphy is still a channel for written communication, many believe that it should be classified in a unique category because it is both art and functionality. Harrist and Wong stated Chinese calligraphy is “the art thought to embody more directly and more vividly than any other the unique physical presence and the creative personality of the individual writer” (p. xix). As an art, calligraphy has certain guidelines that viewers are encouraged to take into consideration. These are strokes, harmony and contrast, characters, and the soul. Strokes must feel alive, varying in thickness and flair. Characters must be beautiful and balanced, as well as executed with the calligrapher’s own touch. The soul is the expression of the calligrapher’s emotions that appears in a work. According to Ho, “spontaneity and emotions” create “a flowing vibration and energy” (p. 12). This quote illustrates one of the many fascinations of Chinese calligraphy. A calligrapher paints his soul on paper with black ink. A popular aphorism echoes this idea, stating that “Writing is like the person” (Harrist & Wong, 1999, p. 21).

Due to the representational nature of the Chinese language, calligraphy linked poetry and art together (Lewis, 1981, p. 8). In fact, it was not until Song dynasty that painting was elevated from a “mere craft” and “joined the higher ranks of the fine arts.” This promotion was due to a transformation of painting’s aims to reflect calligraphy’s purpose, form, and technique (Delbanco, 2008). Chinese script is considered to be an indispensable part of brush painting (Cherrett, 1997). During the Eastern Qin dynasty these two talents combined in one man, Wang Hsi-chih, who became China’s most famous artist and most significant calligrapher. Most of his

works of calligraphy take the forms of letters, which became a new venue for calligraphers to express their art during his time. These letters are not valued for their literary content, but rather for the high quality calligraphy with which they were written (Harrist & Wong, 1999).

Another famous calligrapher and poet, Huang Ting-chien, lived during the Song dynasty. He was part of an artistic group that believed that art was self-expression. Huang's personal style is known as one of the "most original and distinctive in the history of Chinese art," but his fashion was taken from an ancient source. An inscription called *Eulogy on Burying a Crane*, originally carved into a cliff side, was shattered to pieces by a lightning strike. Shards of the engraving fell into the nearby Yangtze River, where they could only be seen during certain periods of the year. Huang Ting-chien adapted certain brush techniques from the calligraphy of the fragmented script, which he believed to have been written by Wang Hsi-chih centuries before (Harrist & Wong 1999, p. 108-109). His poetry, like "Pure, Serene Music," reflects traditional subject matter and natural imagery: "Spring's gone. Towards which land? / Ask orioles, who sing/ A hundred tunes none understand. / Riding the wind, they're on the wing" (Xu, 1994, p. 135).

Chinese calligraphy is an art form that Chinese as well as Westerners can enjoy. American culture does not have even a close equivalent to this art form, but it can still be appreciated for its beauty and technique. Unlike Western calligraphy, which often stresses uniformity, Chinese calligraphy permits an almost infinite number of variations. Ink blots and dry brush strokes are not viewed as mistakes, but as "a natural impromptu expression" (Lee, 2005). Many scholars mention that knowledge of the Chinese language is not absolutely necessary to delight in calligraphy. To appreciate Western masterpieces, one does not have to know how to paint with oils or how to construct a pointillist picture to enjoy gazing at the art. In the same way, Western audiences can appreciate Chinese calligraphy as a high art that requires much skill. Scholars from the West studying calligraphy praise it as having "the beauty of an image in painting, the beauty of dynamism in dance, and the beauty of rhythm in music" (Bonan, 1995, p. 1).

Shu fa is an important part of Chinese history that forms the practical and artistic foundation of the country's culture. As the medium of government, scholars, and artists, calligraphy fulfills many duties, including archiving history and documenting the expression of emotions and ideas. It can be appreciated for its technical skill as well as its connection with religious and philosophical ideas. Understanding its role in history and society allows a glimpse into China's past and its present. Calligraphy began at the dawn of China's history and has continued throughout the centuries to the present, remaining a significant element in Chinese culture.

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