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Towards Chinese Calligraphy

Qian Zhuzhong and Fang Desheng

I. History of Chinese Calligraphy: A Brief Overview

Chinese calligraphy, like script itself, began with hieroglyphs and, over time, has developed various styles and schools, constituting an important part of the national cultural heritage. Chinese scripts are generally divided into five categories: Seal script, Clerical (or Official) script, Regular script, Running script, and Cursive script. What follows is a brief introduction of the evolution of Chinese calligraphy.

A. From Prehistory to Xia Dynasty (ca. 16 century B.C.)

The art of calligraphy began with the creation of Chinese characters. Without modern technology in ancient times, “Sound couldn’t travel to another place and couldn’t remain, so writings came into being to act as the track of meaning and sound.”¹ However, instead of characters, the first calligraphy works were picture-like symbols. These symbols first appeared on ceramic vessels and only showed ambiguous concepts without clear meanings.

The Cishan and Feiligang Cultures resided in the Yellow River basin 8,000 years ago. After a detailed investigation, it was found that the symbols on the ceramic vessels unearthed from Feiligang were a mixture of records and decoration. These symbols are not real characters, but are the rudimentary form of characters. Then, some colored china was unearthed from the ruins of Banpo, which existed during the Yangshao Culture period 6,000 years ago. The symbols on the china were no

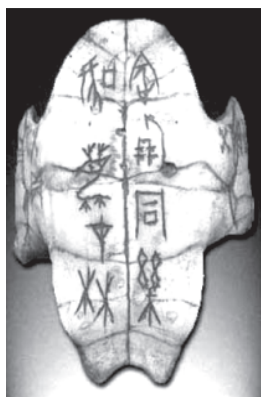


Figure 1: Oracle script.



Figure 2: Bronze script.



Figure 3: *Shiguwen*
(Stone-Drum inscriptions).

longer decoration and are considered the origin of Chinese characters. The original characters appeared in this period and describe concrete objects. Though they are simple and still somewhat disorderly, they express the essence of art.

B. From the Shang Dynasty to the Warring States Period (16th century B.C.–221 B.C.)

The Oracle script refers to the scripts carved by the ancients of the Shang Dynasty on tortoise shells and ox scapulas (shoulder blades), which are considered to be the earliest written language of China. The Shangs were a very superstitious people. Their rulers performed divination. After each divination, the dates, events, and results would be written down by carving on tortoise shells or bones. These oracle bones were first found in the Yin ruins at Xiaotun Village, Anyang County, Henan Province, in 1889. They were written records from 3,000 years before. The oracle bone characters have many variations of strokes: from thin to thick, gentle to hard, and slow to fast. The Oracle character was rectangular in shape and laid the foundations of the Chinese character. Figure 1 shows the calligraphy carved on a tortoise shell.

During this period, inscription on bronze was another calligraphy form. This kind of calligraphy style is generally called Bronze script (Fig. 2). It was prevalent in the Zhou dynasty. Different from the Oracle script, these characters were created through casting a mold, instead of being engraved with a sharp instrument. Therefore, the strokes of the characters are much thicker.

In the Zhou Dynasty, calligraphy works engraved on stones appeared, which later were popular in the Qin Dynasty. These stone calligraphy works were highly praised for their forceful strokes and structure. One of the most famous works is the inscription carved on the 10 Stone Drums, called *Shiguwen* (Stone-Drum inscriptions, see Fig. 3), the content of which praises the emperor of Qin. *Shiguwen* can now be seen in the Palace Museum in Beijing.

C. Qin Dynasty (221 B.C.–206 B.C.)

In the Warring State Period, the whole country was divided into several small kingdoms. Each one had its own language, which hindered



Figure 4: *Taishan Shi Ke* by Li Si.

economic development. After the country was unified by Emperor Qin, Chinese characters were unified too. This is a great achievement in the history of China. The unified style is called the Small-Seal Script. All the different calligraphy styles before the Qin Dynasty, including the Oracle script, the Bronze script, and characters on stone, are called the Big-Seal Script. Both the Big-Seal and the Small-Seal are called the Seal script, which is the first calligraphy style in history. At that time, the characters were limited to seal carving, which is why we call this writing style the Seal script.

One of the typical characteristics of Seal characters is an image that shows the origins of the Chinese character. The *Taishan Shi Ke* (inscriptions on stone in Tai Mountain, Fig. 4), written by Li Si, the prime minister of Qin, is one of the most famous Small-Seal works. Compared with Big-Seal, we can see that the Small-Seal characters are more abstract and standardized.

D. Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.)

Although Small-Seal script is a standard form of calligraphy, it is very difficult to write. Consequently, Clerical script appeared. Clerical script is the simplification of Seal script, and the goal of this style is to be convenient to write. In the Han Dynasty, the change from Seal script to Clerical script was completed. The appearance of the Clerical script is revolutionary in the history of Chinese calligraphy. Not only did



(a) *Liqi Tablet*

(b) *Shimen Song*

(c) *Juyan Han Jian*

Figure 5: Works in Clerical Script.

the shape of characters become square, but the writing became more diverse.

There were two kinds of artistic forms of Clerical script in the Han Dynasty. The major one was characters engraved on stone, called *Han-bei* (stele of Han). The other was characters written on bamboo or silk called *Jian* (piece of bamboo) and *Bo* (silk), respectively.

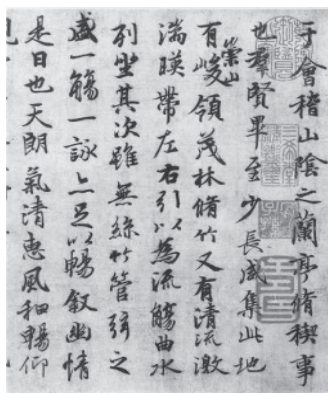
The strokes of Clerical-script calligraphy are full of twists and turns. The heads of the lines are like the heads of silkworms and the ends are like swallowtails. Differing from the Seal style, the shape of the character is wider and shorter. Figure 5 shows three calligraphy works of the Clerical type. The *Liqi Tablet* (Fig. 5a) was engraved in 156 AD, and is now on display at the Confucius Temple in Shandong province. The characters are well structured and are the same size, as the strict formula demands. The lines of the characters are full of variation, with a special thick press and a sharp end. This work had a great effect on the form of the Regular style in the Tang Dynasty. The *Shimen Song* (Eulogy of Shimen, Fig. 5b) is another work of Clerical script. It is engraved on a huge cliff in Shanxi province. Different from *Liqi Tablet*, the size of the characters changes without a strict formula, and most of the strokes are thin and playful, which shows the great creativity of the calligrapher. Figure 5c shows a work of *Jian*, unearthed from the Juyan in Neimenggu province. These characters also represent the uniqueness of Clerical script and have great artistic value.

E. Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–589 A.D.)

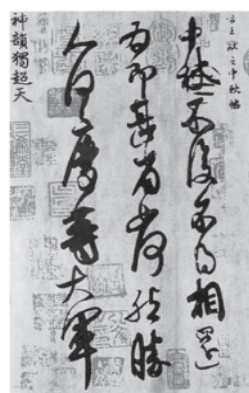
In the Three Kingdoms period, Clerical script declined gradually. At the same time, *Kai Shu*, or Regular script, came into being and became the major style of calligraphy. Most of the calligraphers were in the Kingdom Wei, so we call this period in the history of calligraphy Wei. In Wei, a lot of works in the Regular style are engraved on stone, the magnum opus of which is *Xuanshi Biao*.

Though the Jin Dynasty (265–420 A.D.) existed for only 155 years, calligraphy reached its full development. During Jin, more and more people believed that there was an aesthetic value behind writing characters. There were many great calligraphers who had a profound effect on those coming afterwards. The most famous is Wang Xizhi. He is respectfully addressed as “Calligraphy Saint” and his calligraphy work, *Lanting Xu* (the Preface of Lanting, Fig. 6a), is considered the best Running script on earth. One of his sons, Wang Xianzhi, is another noted calligrapher. He developed his father’s art and created “script in one stroke” (Fig. 6b).

After the Jin, the country was divided into two parts, and calligraphy art was also split into the north and the south. In northern China, the tablets with Regular characters were popular. It was called the Northern Wei Tablet style. In southern China, calligraphy works on paper with Running scripts were more common. Figure 6c shows the famous tablet-style work, *Zhang Menglong Tablet*.



(a) Wang Xizhi, *Lanting Xu*



(b) Wang Xianzhi



(c) Zhang Menglong Tablet

Figure 6: Works of the “Two Wangs”.

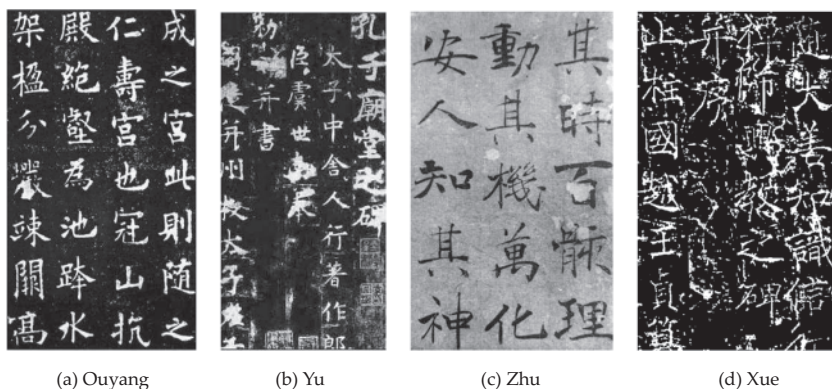


Figure 7: Works of Four Master Calligraphers in the Earlier Tang.

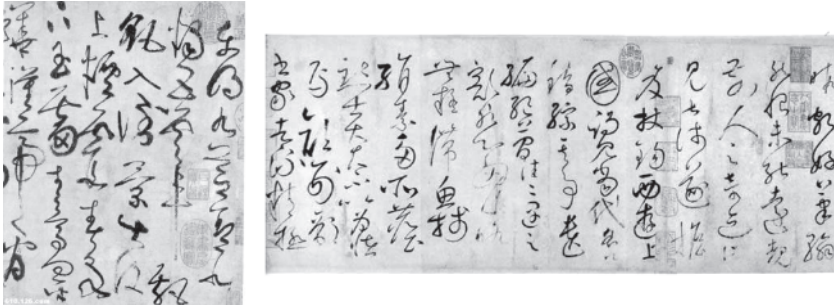
F. Sui and Tang Dynasties (581–907 A.D.)

Sui unified the south and the north, and in the following Tang Dynasty the whole country was relatively peaceful. The different styles of calligraphy art merged, too. In this period, the formation of the Regular script was finally completed. But the Sui Dynasty was too short to have an effect on the development of calligraphy; it acts as the prelude to the calligraphy art of the Tang dynasty.

The Tang Dynasty was the most powerful period in Chinese history in almost all regards. Its culture was wide and deep, great and colorful, and it reached the pinnacle of the feudal culture in China. As one of the most important art forms, calligraphy flourished. During the Tang Dynasty, Regular, Running, and Cursive script all began a new phase and the effect on future eras is much greater than during any other dynasty in history. In this period, Chinese characters reached full maturity when they became standardized. These characters were almost the same as printed Chinese characters today. The calligraphy art in Tang can be divided into three phases.

1. From Sui to Earlier Tang

The calligraphy art slowly changed into a new phase. The mainstream is the Regular script, whose structure is restricted by several rules. There are four standouts in the calligraphy coterie of the earlier Tang: Ouyang Xun, Yu Shinan, Zhu Suiliang, and Xue Ji. Figure 7 shows their works.



(a) Zhang

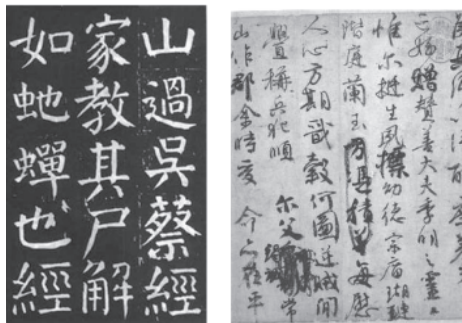
(b) Huai

Figure 8: Two Crazy Cursive Calligraphy Works in the Middle Tang.

2. Middle Tang

At that time, the ideology pursued the romantic and was free of traditional expectations, thus calligraphy was also expressed in an unconstrained way. Figure 8 shows the crazy cursive works of Zhang Xu and Huai Su, which are outstanding examples in this period.

In the years to come, with the efforts of Yan Zhenqing and other calligraphers, new standards of the Regular script came into being and became the orthodoxy of Chinese calligraphy. The Regular script written by Yan Zhenqing is called “Yan type” (Fig. 9a). When first beginning to practice calligraphy, this is the form most typically studied. Moreover, Yan Zhenqing was good at the Running and Cursive script; his work, *Jizhigao* (Commemoration of the Nephew, Fig. 9b), is respected as the second best example, following the *Lantian Xu*. Thus, the styles of Chinese calligraphy were established.



(a) Magushan Xiantan Ji

(b) Ji Zhi Gao

Figure 9: Yan's works.



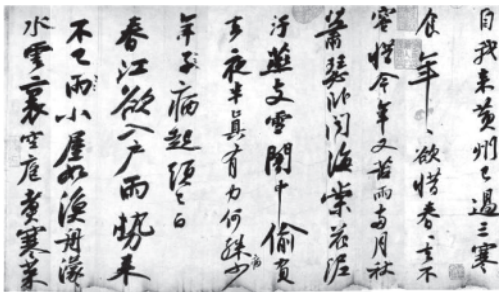
Figure 10: Yang, *Jiuhua Tie*.

3. Late Tang

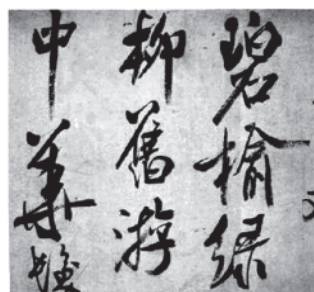
With the weakening of national power and the chaos caused by war, the art of calligraphy declined. In this period, Yang Ninshi was the mainstay; his work, *Jiuhua Tie* (Leek Flower Script, Fig. 10), is well renowned.

G. Song Dynasty (960–1276 A.D.)

While the calligraphy of the Tang dynasty is formulistic, the calligraphy of the Song has a stress on *Yi* (Will), focusing on the personality and creation. The work is not only naturalistic, but also full of knowledge. Su, Huang, Mi, and Cai are the four famous calligraphers of the Song period, all of whom were senior officials or intellectuals. Their calligraphy works exude knowledge and gentleness. Figure 11a is Su's most famous work, *Hanshi Tie* (Hanshi Script), and Fig. 11b is selected from one of Mi's works.

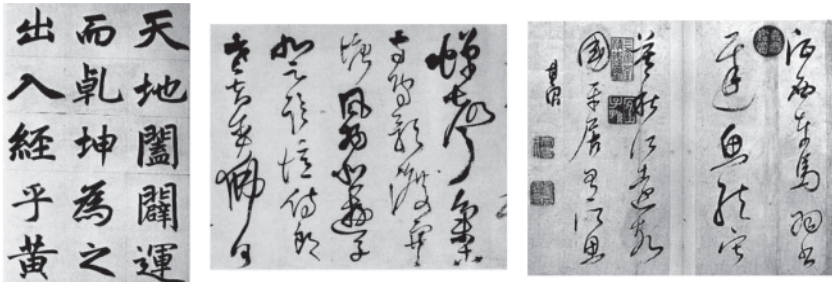


(a) Su, *Hanshi Tie*



(b) Mi, *Hongxian Shi*

Figure 11: Works in the Song Dynasty.



(a) Zhao, *Sanmen Ji*

(b) Wang, *Cursive Scroll of Poems*

(c) Dong, *Cursive Page*

Figure 12: Works in Yuan and Ming.

H. Yuan and Ming Dynasty (1271–1644 A.D.)

Economic and cultural development slowed during the Yuan Dynasty. Calligraphy returned to the ancients, following Jin and Tang with little innovation. The calligraphy of Yuan emphasizes form, and calligraphers strictly follow the rules of writing. The best calligrapher in Yuan was Zhao Mengfu. He studied the works of Wang Xizhi carefully and had a particular understanding of his style. His work (Fig. 12a) is gentle and elegant, partly because he embraced Buddhism and wanted to escape in spirit.

There were a lot of good calligraphers in the Ming Dynasty, each representing different styles. For mind expansion, calligraphy advocated personality, pursuing big works and visual impressions. Consequently, the primary calligraphy system was destroyed. Some of the representative calligraphers were Zhu Yunming, Wang Duo, Zhang Ruitu, and Huang Daozhou. However, other calligraphers followed more conservative styles, the most famous being Dong Qichang. Figure 12b is the Cursive script work of Wang and Fig. 12c is Dong's work.

I. Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 A.D.)

In the Qing Dynasty, the government required intellectuals nationwide to write in the so-called Guange Style of calligraphy, which was uniform, smooth, dark, and clear. Of course, there were a lot of calligraphic dissidents in the middle and late Qing Dynasty, for example, Zheng Banqiao during the earlier Qing Dynasty and Kang Youwei during the late Qing Dynasty. From the late Ming to early Qing, ink scripts, which are delicate and gentle, took up a predominant posi-

tion in calligraphy. During the middle and late Qing era, with more and more archaeological discoveries in China, calligraphers focused increasingly on tombstone tablets, which are both forceful and fluid. Kang Youwei, who was not only a calligrapher but also a politician and a thinker, was one of the important men during this change. He had two main purposes: the first was to reinvigorate the artistic creativity of calligraphers by giving them a different idea; the second was to encourage people to break away from the confinement of the calligraphy standards set during the Tang Dynasty.

J. Calligraphy Today (1911–present)

The practical functions of calligraphy are decreasing as printing becomes more prominent while calligraphy is becoming further removed from the daily life of ordinary people. Calligraphy art is changing drastically. In the 1980s and 1990s, the so-called “Modern Calligraphy” was prevalent. It has been influenced by Western modern art and Japanese modern calligraphy. Essentially, this artistic movement should be attributed to the strong self-motivation of Chinese artists who hope to develop new art expressions for their era on the basis of traditional Chinese calligraphy. However, in regard to the uniqueness of Chinese calligraphy, solely learning from Western art cannot be the right way, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections. Certainly, calligraphy should keep on developing, but we must make sure that such development is based on tradition. Now we have entered the Information Age, with more and more people using computers instead of writing by hand. The practical significance of calligraphy has decreased rapidly, so how Chinese calligraphy is to survive today is also worth considering.

II. Characteristics of Chinese Calligraphy

A. The Nationality of Chinese Calligraphy

As the story goes, hieroglyphics were the template for Chinese characters since Fu Xi made the Eight Diagrams and Cang Jie invented the characters. In the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Explaining Writings and Analyzing Characters, abbreviated *Shuo*), written by Xu Shen during the Han Dynasty, there is a statement about Fu Xi: “Upwards, watching the celestial phenomena; downwards, learning formulas on the ground.

Observe animal character at the right place; Analyze phenomena depending on others as well as one's own efforts."² This was so that he could make the Eight Diagrams. The *Shu Duan* (Calligraphy Theory) by Zhang Huaiguan during the Tang Dynasty says: "[Jie] watched the various combinations of stars, and studied the veins of turtle shells and the flying trace of the bird, from which he learned all kinds of beauties, so that he could invent the characters."³ Although the records are uncertain, these examples show that the property of the Chinese characters is what we would call "picture-like." In remote antiquity, people had no rational theory of word formation. From pre-Qin Dynasty unearthed relics, the characters on animal bones and the inscriptions in bronze you can tell that Big-Seal script is not as standardized as Small-Seal script. There are several different structures for one character, which shows that the appearance of Chinese characters owes to the long-term accumulation of national wisdom rather than one individual effort. The variation of characters further popularizes calligraphy art and the evolving Chinese language. In the Qin Dynasty, China was united and Big-Seal script was substituted for Small-Seal script, after which the Small-Seal script became standard, although the vitality and meaning were subsequently lost.

In *Shuo*, Chinese characters are summarized into *Liu Shu*, six categories of characters: "pictorial," "official," "symbolic," "sound-related," "co-explaining," and "borrowing." These special characteristics of Chinese characters are unique in the world, making Chinese calligraphy a unique art form. Before the Qin Dynasty, most structures of characters were very complex, much like painting. As time went on, Chinese characters were simplified and standardized for the convenience of writing and memorization. What calligraphers express through characters is now far removed from the original meaning.

Chinese calligraphy's role as one of the most specialized arts in the world is due to the fact that calligraphy is not just a method of communication but also a means of expressing emotions. Different calligraphers make varying stipples, structures, and art of composition with different characters.

B. "Four Treasures of the Study"

Not only the art form of Chinese calligraphy is unique, but its tools to create art works are also distinctive. The four necessary tools of calligraphy, the "four treasures of the study," included brush, ink, paper,

and ink stone, and are different from what we use to write characters today.

Writing brushes are basic writing tools in China, and there are three major types: goat-hair brushes, black rabbit fur brushes, and yellow weasel fur brushes. On the basis of the tip function, the brushes are classified into three groups: hard, soft, and combination. The handle may be made not only of bamboo, wood, lacquer, and porcelain, but also of some precious materials including mother-of-pearl, ivory, and jade.

Writing brushes have such a long history that prehistoric painted pottery, oracle bones, bamboo slips, and silks were all writing materials for brush. Ancient writing brushes were also excavated from graves from the Spring and Autumn Period, the Warring States, and the Qin and Han Dynasties.

Because of the special tool, the brush pen, calligraphy can show the “abstract” beauty of the line. Chinese brushes are made from animal hair that is bundled together and put on bamboo reeds. The hair is from wolves, sheep, rabbits, deer, foxes, or mice, depending on the type of writing. For small delicate writing, one uses rabbit hair. For bold writing, sheep wool is preferable. One must take good care of the brushes to keep the point stiff and straight. Brushes are divided into soft brushes, hard brushes, and another type, called *Jian Hao*, is made of several kinds of hair in suitable proportion for the demanded rigidity. Cai Yong of the Han Dynasty said, “Just the soft makes special effect.” That means that writing with a Chinese brush can create many different styles of line. Differing from any other writing tools all around the world and pens used nowadays, Chinese brushes make vastly different lines, depending on the degree of pressure and the direction of movement. This change can be found in the masterpieces of each Dynasty, and existed before abstract painting of any form.

The ink-stick is the unique pigment of Chinese traditional painting and calligraphy. At the initial stage, natural ink or half-natural ink was generally used. It was during the Han that artificial ink appeared. At that time, the most famous ink-stick was *Yumi-mo*, produced at Xianyang, Shanxi. The raw materials of ink-stick were pine, oil, and lacquer.

Before the Five Dynasties, the ink-producing center was in the North, and then it reached the South. The most celebrated Southern ink-stick was *Hui-mo*, which was produced in Huizhou of Anhui. Nowadays,

we use calligraphy ink instead of grinding ink-sticks. There are many good quality inks, such as *Yide Ge* ink and *Caosugong* ink.

The vehicle of Chinese calligraphy changed from oracle bones to wood slips, bamboo slips, and silk. Finally, paper became the best material for its cheap price and good quality. Paper is one of the most famous Chinese inventions. It is widely accepted that paper was invented by Cai Lun in the Eastern Han. However, archaeologists have discovered paper of the Western Han such as *Fang Ma Tan*, *Ba Quao*, *Xuan Quan*, *Ma Quan Wan*, *Ju Yan*, and *Han Tan Po*. After the Eastern Jin Dynasty, paper was extensively used instead of traditional writing materials like bamboo slips and silks. Various methods of producing paper emerged one after another. In the Tang and Song Dynasties, the paper-producing industry was especially thriving. Celebrated products of the best quality appeared. In the Qing, *Xuan* paper, produced in Jing Prefecture of Anhui (Xuanzhou), became the special paper for painting and calligraphy, and was regarded as "the king of the paper." Nowadays, we call special calligraphy paper *Xuan* paper.

Xuan paper is different from modern papers, which are soft and absorbent. Writing on the special paper, we can find the different depths of ink according to the ink concentration and the writing speed. The better the quality of a paper, the more delicate variation can be expressed; however, the more difficult it is for the calligrapher to control what he/she is writing. Consequently, to be a good calligrapher, hard and long hours of practice are required.

The ink stone is the most valuable among the four treasures of the study. Because of their solid texture, ink stones have been handed down from ancient times. In the ruins of primitive societies, the archaeologists discovered a simple stone ink-slab that was used along with a pestle to grind pigments. After artificial ink-sticks appeared in Han, the pestle gradually disappeared. There were pottery ink-slabs, lacquer ink-slabs, and copper ink-slabs in the Han Dynasty (as well as stone ink-slabs). Among the stone ink-slabs, round tripod pieces were the most typical. During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, round tripod porcelain ink-slabs were in vogue. It was in the Sui and Tang that *Piyong* ink stones with circular legs appeared.

Beside the four treasures of the study, there are some accessories, such as penholders, brush pots, paperweights, and so on. Through the use of these unique tools, Chinese calligraphy became great art in the world.

C. The Influence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism

The origins of Chinese culture are mainly centered in Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism was brought into China beginning in the Han Dynasty, and became one of the mainstays of Chinese culture. According to *Zhou Li* (the ceremony of the Zhou Dynasty), ceremony, musicianship, shooting, reigning, writing, and counting, namely *Liu Yi* (Six Skills), were some of the learner's required subjects in ancient China.

Confucius thought highly of ceremony, which refers to that of the Zhou Dynasty: "learn nothing of ceremony, get nothing;"⁴ that is to say, "Not learning the ceremony of the Zhou Dynasty means he won't be a successful man." The core thought of Confucius is *ren*⁵ (benevolence, humanity, or kindness), which features a respectable personality and the highest attainable level of ethics. To practice *ren*, Confucius encouraged his followers to love others, to honor one's parents, to adore one's siblings, and to do what is right. Su Shi highly praised the *ren* of Confucius. He added detailed commentary to *Yi Jing* (the Book of Changes), *Shu Jing* (the classic of history), and *Lunyu* (the Analects of Confucius), all of which are Confucian classics, and he disseminated them widely.

Confucius also recognized "Zhong He" as the ruling principle of gentlemen. "Zhong He" is similar to "Zhon Yong" (doctrine of the mean), which presents the philosophy that "beyond is as wrong as falling short."⁶ Another classic, *Da Xue* (Great Learning), says, "Elevate one's mind, keep one's family harmonious, govern the country, and then make the whole world peaceful."⁷ Also, there are "I would like to cultivate the magnanimous gesture"⁸ and "Get rid of all the other schools, and honor Confucianism uniquely," by Dong Zhongshu, which made Confucianism the sole theory of state in the Han Dynasty.

In ancient China, Confucianism deeply affected scholars. They wanted to be useful to society and their ultimate goal was world peace. Confucianism affected the theory of Chinese calligraphy deeply, because most of the calligraphers believed that writing expresses one's personality. In the Han Dynasty, a famous Confucian, Yang Xiong, said, "The lines of calligraphy are the tracks of one's mind."⁹ In the Tang Dynasty, Liu Gongquan, an outstanding calligrapher, inherited and developed the idea, "A decent man's writing follows formula."¹⁰ Su Shi, who was a literary magnate and also a famous calligrapher in the Song Dynasty, once said, "One's appearance cannot cover up one's mind; one's statement cannot hide one's character; and one's writing

cannot conceal one's emotion."¹¹ In the calligraphy works of the Clerical style in the Han Dynasty, the characters are plain but elegant, which display the great character and morals of a gentleman.

The original principle and ultimate objective of Taoism is *Tao*: "Tao of heaven, Tao of earth, and Tao of humanity." Our essential task is to realize the Tao during all our lives. This requires us to abandon our individual self and combine ourselves metaphysically with everything in heaven and on earth. Because of the continuing war at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, people lived in an abyss of suffering. With the plaint to the short-lived San Guo and the ephemeral West Jin Dynasty, scholars wrote verses expressing sentiments such as: things clear away soon; life is very weak and out of human's ability to control; thus, pay less attention to life and death.

Scholars and bureaucrats willingly read the *Dao De Jing* (The Way and its Power), *Zhuang Zi* and *Yi Jing*, namely "three metaphysics," late into the night, burning the midnight candle. They expressed their feelings of fugacious lifetime by writing calligraphy, which led to the peak of freestyle art and numerous changes. The Jin Dynasty, the first period of bloom in the history of Chinese calligraphy, was difficult to measure up to by successors. All the notable persons in the Jin Dynasty were skilled calligraphers, such as Wang Xizhi, Wang Xianzhi, Xie An, and Wang Dao, among whom Wang Xizhi and his seventh son Wang Xianzhi—called "the two Wangs"—are most outstanding. The works of these master calligraphers are forms of a true and pure outpouring that cannot be imitated.

Next we discuss the major effects of Taoism on Chinese calligraphy. Firstly, Taoism emphasizes nature while paying little attention to fame and fortune. In Taoism, *Tao* (the Way) is the core idea, characterized by the way of nature: "Man models himself on earth, earth on heaven, heaven on the Way, and the Way on that which is naturally so."¹² Taoism teaches us to follow natural formulas, facing life with an easy mind. This philosophy impacted the people in the Jin Dynasty deeply. Secondly, while the only way to Tao is practicing technique, Tao is far more advanced than merely technique. In the Jin Dynasty, Tao became the highest status of calligraphy art. Thirdly, Tao means delicacy. *Dao De Jing* says that Tao finds expression in niceties, the so-called "occult" and "unspeakable," and is obtained by "silently observing." People in the Jin Dynasty incorporated naturalness into calligraphy so that very slight changes are expressed. Using a soft brush and writing with dynamic strokes is similar to "anything according to formula."¹³ Tao-

ism's profound influence on art in the Jin Dynasty in turn influences Chinese Calligraphy. And because of the master calligraphers, such as Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, whose artworks are considered as something holy, the Jin calligraphy became foundational to Chinese calligraphy art. Consequently, Taoism continued to affect calligraphy art in the later dynasties, even when Confucianism was in the dominant position.

One of the most important ways to disseminate Buddhism is through the *sutra*. Before the invention of block printing, the copies of *sutra* were written manually. Most of the copiers were Buddhists and hermits. They believed that spreading Buddhism by writing *sutras* was of boundless beneficence, not only good for themselves but helpful for others. During the 7th century, Buddhism bloomed and many literary men began to write *sutras*. They were deeply attracted by the beautiful language and dialectical thinking. They also copied *sutras* because it was the easiest art form in which to perceive the Buddhist allegory. From the Sui Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, and in modern China as well, most of the great calligraphers left some *sutra* copy works, for example, Liu Gongquan's *Diamond Sutra*, Su Shi's *Xin Jing* (Heart *sutra*), and Huang Tingjian's *Analects of Wenyi*. The story goes that Master Hongyi once selected sentences from *Huayan Jing* to write couplets as presents to kindred spirits, from which we can see this genuine devotion to Buddhism.

In the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the schools of Buddhism came into being and Buddhism reached its highest development, when almost all the people believed in it. In this period, the number of *sutra* writers surged. These writers believed in Buddhism and copied *sutras* with great care, some of which were full of artistic appeal. Although we cannot identify their names, they are good calligraphers. In the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China periods, a large number of *sutra* scripts spread out from the stone caves of Dunhuang, among which most of the classic works were created during the Sui and Tang Dynasty. Different from the Tablet style and practical written style, *sutra* script is a special kind of calligraphy style, because the *sutra* copier perhaps didn't view copying *sutra* as an artistic creation. However, with genuine devotion to Buddhism and respect for the *sutra*, these copiers wrote carefully and seriously. Thus the *sutra*-copy works embody discretion and naturalness. Unfortunately, most of the classic ones were removed by Paul Pelliot and Marc Aurel Stein.

The *sutras* written on paper do not keep for long, because the paper is easily broken, so many *sutras* are engraved on stones. *Jing Zhuang* is one of the *sutras* on stone, and is erected either in front of temples or beside towers. They boast nice figures with gorgeous technique. Not only architectural artwork, they are also an art of calligraphy. Another kind of *sutra* is cut onto cliffs, such as *Diamond Sutra* in Tai Mountain and *Wen Shu Prajna* in Shuiniu Mountain. These *sutras* have endured for centuries and become venerable cultural relics. From the *sutras* on stones, we can observe one of calligraphy's changes in style.

If Buddha statues are one of the artistic peaks in history, the statue tablets are another peak, especially the tablets in the Southern and Northern Dynasty, which were highly valued by the calligraphers in the Qing Dynasty. The praises of the tablets in later generations represent the aesthetic trend of "return to naturalness."

It is most important to know that Buddhism is a common belief in all classes of the society. In ancient China, the tablets were built when a temple was finished or a respectable monk died. The characters were usually written by senior calligraphers, and later became famous calligraphy works. It is worth mentioning that the famous Emperor Li Shiming in the Tang Dynasty liked the Wang Xizhi's calligraphy very much. He collected almost all the calligraphy works of Wang Xizhi, and ordered a monk named Huai Ren to select characters from these works, combine them into a new work, and then engrave them on a tablet. Finally, seventeen years later, Wang Xizhi "wrote" the work *Sheng Jiao Xu* (the Preface to *Sutras*) for Emperor Li. The *Sheng Jiao Xu* was co-written by Li Shiming and his son, Li Zhi, to honor monk Xuan Zang, who suffered while going to India and bringing back the Buddhist classics. Nowadays, this tablet has become a very important work for studying Wang's calligraphy art because none of the ink scripts of Wang exist anymore. In addition, famous calligrapher Li Yong wrote *Lushang Temple Tablet*, Yan Zhenqing wrote *Duobao Tower Tablet*, Liu Gongquan wrote *Xuanbi Tower Tablet*, and so on. Thus, for Buddhist practice, calligraphy works could be preserved and handed down; and precisely because of the calligraphy art, Buddhism was swiftly disseminated. Calligraphy and Buddhism are auxiliary to each other and together became a part of the Chinese culture.

The Tang Dynasty is the peak of the Regular style; however, such a rational writing manner actually tightly restricted individuality. While calligraphy is an art form, it expresses individual emotion. Since the Song Dynasty, more and more calligraphers stressed *Yi* (Will), pursu-

ing the expression of one's individuality, which essentially is the effect of Buddhism. In the Song Dynasty, many famous calligraphers were Buddhist, including Su Shi, Huang Tingjian and Mi Fu. Huang kept in touch with famous monks and the basis of his outlook on life was from Buddhism and Taoism. He had an open mind, which deeply impacted his art. As he said, "my calligraphy has no rules,"¹⁴ which corresponds to "do anything as Will." Both Su and Mi were good at the technique of calligraphy: "every stroke is an artistic line and every work according to formula," which corresponds to "Buddha is everywhere."

In the Ming Dynasty, famous calligrapher Dong Qichang's study was called *Hua Chan studio* (Drawing Buddha), which had a close relation with Buddhism. Zhu Da was both a painter and a calligrapher, who lived in the late Ming and earlier Qing Dynasty. Though he was monk and his paintings feel light and immaterial, his calligraphy works are flaming and vigorous, which has something to do with the Chinese Buddhist theory, "spring forth from mud without being dirty."

It is necessary to point out that except in the Jin Dynasty, there were so-called "personalities without the restriction of the Confucian ceremony and actions of men." Most intellectuals had a uniform belief in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. "Rich, then help others; poor, then cultivate with oneself"¹⁵ is the basic principle of these intellectuals. Among the calligraphers in Chinese history, there are emperors, officers, and frustrated intellectuals. All of them have something to do with these three ancient philosophies. The effect of these philosophies on calligraphy is both direct and indirect, and shows the spirit of calligraphy in one's individual life, called the *Yun* (aura) in calligraphy.

D. Chinese Calligraphy, Painting and Music

Before analyzing the relationship between Chinese calligraphy, painting, and music, two important people must be mentioned: one is Hegel, one of the most influential German philosophers of the 19th century; and the other is Max Weber, a leading scholar and founder of modern sociology. Summing-up European philosophy and the study of political economy, Hegel proposed the phenomenology of spirit, containing the "self." In his aesthetics, he pointed out that, "the beautiful is the sensuous manifestation of the absolute idea."¹⁶ The objectification of the "absolute idea" is art. When Max Weber discussed why modern Western civilization appeared in Europe but not in other areas, he described the whole process of rationalization. Based on his Neo-Kan-

tianism, he reviewed all the historical processes of European civilization to prove his theory, including religion, politics, economy, law, etc.¹⁷ We don't want to simply support Hegel and Weber's philosophical and sociological ideas, but to examine the universality of the model of Chinese thinking about art.

Chinese art is the objectification of Chinese thought in its totality. Essentially, Chinese art is a kind of subjective art. Although we know that the Chinese words are hieroglyphics, the characters became less picture-like as the language evolved. That is to say, people started to disregard the form.

Chinese calligraphy does not objectify "things," rather it essentially objectifies human life itself. Calligraphy is the art of writing lines on *Xuan* paper with a brush. It is said, "the lines of calligraphy are the tracks of one's mind," which makes this kind of artistic writing extremely unique. Western analysis of calligraphy cannot address its true complexity. It seems so simple, just dipping a soft brush into some ink and writing some characters on *Xuan* paper. However, in fact, this kind of art is very complex and has a history as old as the Chinese character. With a brush and a piece of paper, Wang Xizhi had the same expressiveness as J. S. Bach. Wang Duo's calligraphy works are as effective as Beethoven's great symphonies or chamber music. Calligraphy, seen at first as just handwriting on paper, has little significance. But in truth, it is profoundly significant: it is the expression of one's own life. Not all lines written with a brush can be called calligraphic lines. Calligraphic lines correspond to a formula, and contain strength, fluidity, and variation. Using high-quality strokes, calligraphers construct characters with diverse shapes, and think about the arrangement of the artistic parts with respect to the whole. A calligraphy work's creation process cannot be repeated. All calligraphy strokes are permanent and immutable, demanding careful planning and confident execution, and involving many years of hard training. Different styles of writing and different forms of work form the Chinese calligraphy art. The spirit of Chinese art is the result of this Chinese "totality thinking."

1. Calligraphy and Painting

As we know, Chinese calligraphy and Chinese painting are closely connected: "calligraphy and painting derive from the same root." This is basically right. Chinese characters, the vehicle of Chinese calligraphy, are hieroglyphic, and Chinese characters are derived from natu-

ral objects. The more ancient the character, the more picture-like it appears. Seal script, such as inscriptions on oracle bones and bronzes, shows this clearly. Most of the Seal characters are just small abstract pictures. Secondly, calligraphy and painting share most tools and create works in similar ways. Calligraphy and painting both were good means for ancient Chinese literates to express their emotions. Generally speaking, most of the outstanding Chinese painters have been good calligraphers. The major reason is that Chinese painters need to write relevant poems or sentences on their paintings. In most cases it is necessary, because the characteristic of Chinese painting is abstract. Perhaps there is a large blank space in the picture, and then these characters can make the painting richer and more artistic.

The painting *Luoshenfu* by Gu Kaizhi included an inscription in calligraphy. In the Song Dynasty, the literate paintings were popular and Su Shi is an outstanding example. Moreover, Mi landscape was an impressive invention by Mi Fu and his son. In the Yuan Dynasty, Ni Zan and Zhao Ziang were both painters and calligraphers. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were more calligraphers and painters, among whom Dong Qichang and Xu Wei are the most famous, and the next best are Wen Zhengming and Tang Yin. It is worth mentioning that Zheng Banqiao, one of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, was respected for representing “Three perfections—of poetry, calligraphy and painting.” Of course, the men who devoted their time to an in-depth study of the relationship between calligraphy and painting are Zhu Da, Wu Changshuo, and Huang Binhong.

All the calligraphy and paintings of Zhu are exaggerated with deep meanings. Zhu’s paintings are highly abstract. He employed simple and gentle lines in his paintings. Looking at the composition of the painting, large blank spaces remained in his works that strikingly contrasted with black places. Wu was a good calligrapher in his early years and was famous for the Seal script, and especially good at *Shiguwen*. Several years later, he began to devote himself to painting. His calligraphy deeply influenced his painting. Many years of writing *Shiguwen* made his art lines aged and forceful, which was quite suitable in his paintings.

Huang intensively studied Big-Seal script and immersed himself in its simple and harmonious style. While learning *Da Yu Ding*, he said, “I like to artistically copy this work and have practiced it for more than ten years and have benefited a lot from it. However, the simple and forceful tinge pervading the work is so difficult to reach; I have

not even grasped more than a tenth of it.”¹⁸ He also advised, “keep the brush vertical, aim for the forceful lines, neither too soft nor too hard, yet natural and fluid. After grasping the technique, any casual writing can produce a wonderful impression. Drawing branches as the way of writing Seal script, pavilions and houses as writing Clerical script, and turning the tip of brush represents the concave and convex of stones and mountains. That is why the painting method is interlinked with calligraphy.”¹⁹ Huang’s article describes in detail the relationship between painting and calligraphy. There are other similarities between painting and calligraphy, including the usage of ink. Most notable is the likeness between ink-wash painting and calligraphy. Through changing the depth of ink and the quantity of mixed water, the calligrapher and the painter can construct the desired atmosphere. This is also the difference between Chinese painting and Western oil painting, which achieves this effect by mixing various colors. Thus, strictly speaking, stereography does not exist in Chinese painting.

2. Calligraphy and Music



Figure 13: Yan
Ji Zhi Gao.

As far as the artistic components, both music and calligraphy stress rhythm. Rhythm is one of the four elements of music. Even the *sanban* (free measure), a Chinese music instrument of Chinese plays (Chinese traditional music and traditional opera) belongs to the rhythm category. The skills required writing calligraphy, such as pressing and releasing, forwarding and turning, demonstrate great rhythm, which is expressed most clearly in Running and Cursive works. For example, look at Figure 13, which is taken from the famous *Ji Zhi Gao*, written by Yan Zhenqing. There are three major meters with one transition. The first two characters compose one meter, following the third character is the transition, and then the next two characters compose the second major meter. Finally, the last three characters compose the last meter. Generally speaking, the calligrapher will write the entire meter without pausing, and then he will re-ink and readjust his brush to keep the tip aggregate. Good calligraphy works possess a brilliant rhythm comparable to that of music.

Furthermore, compared to Western multi-part music, Chinese music is composed of simple tones (Pentatonic scale).²⁰ Similar to Chinese calligraphy, traditional Chinese music is the result of the Chinese totality-thinking model. The ensemble of Chinese instrumental music doesn't bear the harmony effect of Western music. Traditional Chinese music is not arranged into parts and polyphony does not exist. As a result, this kind of music can be likened to the expression of individual emotion, the soul of which is the internal aura. With a history of some 3,000 years, the *guqin*, a seven-stringed zither, is China's oldest stringed instrument. It was a typical musical instrument in Imperial China. At that time, a well-educated scholar was expected to be skilled in *Siyi* (the Four Arts): *Qin* (the *guqin*), *Qi* (the game of Go), *Shu* (calligraphy), and *Hua* (painting). As one of the necessary skills for intellectuals, *guqin* was mostly used for character building rather than performing. Like calligraphy and painting, this genre of music incorporated elements from Confucianism and Taoism, such as promoting peacefulness and accommodating naturalness.

Naturally, some other Chinese music forms are suited for public performance. One such example is Beijing opera. A lot of properties on stage are simulated, even "invisible," for example the snowfall in Lin Chong's *Rushing at Night* and the horses in *Seize and Release Cao*. Consequently, the virtual coexists with reality on stage, mutually completing one another. In some ways, the principles of Chinese opera are similar to calligraphy and painting, and emphasize a unity of black and white in a work. Here, the part written or painted by the brush is considered "real," while the white space is perceived as "virtual." The "real" part is important, not only showing the skill of the artist, but also expressing his ideas. The "virtual" part is the space left for us to imagine, which serves to enhance the expressiveness of the work enormously. In Western art, artists pay much more attention to the "real." In Western opera, audiences can see almost everything, just like in the real world. In Western pictures, the whole paper is full of color blocks. Furthermore, a key component of Chinese opera lies in "pronunciation and singing," which is similar to the waving motion when writing strokes of calligraphy.

3. Uniqueness of Calligraphy

Calligraphy, painting and music are the three perfections in traditional Chinese art. Although they are closely related, these art forms are

different. First of all, Chinese calligraphy began with the creation of Chinese characters. Inscriptions on oracle bones, the oldest characters in actual existence, are the best record of primeval Chinese calligraphy. It is said that Chinese painting originated from rock painting, but even this cannot be proved. Ancient music cannot remain in its original form because there was no way to record it. We can be certain, however, that Chinese calligraphy matured much earlier than painting and music. With its extremely complicated lines, Chinese calligraphy accumulated the spirit of Chinese culture: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This kind of abstraction is much more apparent in calligraphy than it is in painting or music.

Secondly, because each form has a different manner of expression, their outcomes are quite different. Since calligraphy is expressed with Chinese characters, it is limited to the process of writing. Painting—expressing oneself through image—gives the artist a much larger space in which to play than does calligraphy. Nowadays, Chinese painters also employ Western painting skills to develop Chinese painting. To a great extent, Chinese painting is moving towards a Western model and away from the essence of traditional Chinese culture (as is Chinese music). Only calligraphy is a true Chinese art form. Certainly, Chinese calligraphy is developing on a traditional foundation, and numerous outstanding artists are exploring modern Chinese calligraphy today. Regardless of their success or failure, these artists are worthy of praise. We believe that for the development of Chinese art, borrowing from Western art is a means instead of a goal. The development of Chinese art should be expanded in the context of Chinese civilization. As far as this is concerned, Chinese calligraphy is a remnant of Chinese traditional culture.

Finally, the application of Chinese calligraphy is much wider than painting and music. In ancient times, Chinese people would write characters everyday, so the art of calligraphy was practiced universally. In Chinese history, the number of calligraphers was typically much larger than that of painters. Moreover, calligraphy was one of the required subjects in the imperial examination, and training was easier to obtain than in painting and music. Traditionally, as long as you could write Chinese characters, you could obtain such training. This, of course, was not the case with painting and music. If you want to be a calligrapher, however, the work and diligence required is the same as being a painter or a musician.

In a word, Chinese calligraphy represents the core of Chinese culture. The extremely complicated and highly abstract lines of calligraphy are the representation of Chinese thinking. Seal, Clerical, Regular, Running, and Cursive script styles imply infinite variation. Advanced artistry and practical application represent the spirit of the age. Without exaggeration, Chinese calligraphy is a treasure of Chinese traditional art and one of the most outstanding arts in the world.

III. Calligraphy Today

With thousands of years' development, the situation of calligraphy today is totally different from before. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Western art entered the modernist movement. Diverse schools of art and thought had a great influence on Western traditional art. Schönberg and Stravinsky inaugurated 20th-century modern Western music and there were lots of modern Western master painters, such as Van Gogh, Kandinsky, and Picasso. Amidst this atmosphere of innovative change, what changes occurred in Chinese calligraphy? Chinese calligraphers have to deviate away from thousands of years of tradition. Only in this way, can the development of calligraphy reflect the spirit of our Chinese people today. One important theory of modern calligraphy incorporates Western modern art theory. The "brush" and "ink" should follow the times, thus Chinese calligraphy should not just stay within the traditional limits. Only development and innovation can make calligraphy bloom forever.

However, the greatest obstacle is the specific characteristic of Chinese characters, which is the vehicle of calligraphy. Chinese calligraphy art is based on writing Chinese characters, but the diversity of the characters has already reached its peak. Thus, there is little room for us to exploit. In contrast, painting has much more room for development. Several calligraphers have done some research on this, for example, Qiu Zhenzhong's series on *Characters on Proving*, and the growth of academic calligraphy. Someone even proposed calling it "artistic calligraphy" instead of "calligraphy art." While their research has been enlightening, the question still remains: can calligraphy detach itself from Chinese characters? When the characters are divided into pieces, when calligraphy works are made by pasting diverse materials over a surface, and when calligraphy is treated as an abstract picture instead of writing characters, are all these still considered calligraphy? It is so hard to say.

Of course, some argue that today we allow multiple cultures to coexist, so that the development of calligraphy can be multi-directional. This opinion appeared at the end of the 1980s in China, and the precondition of this theory is the difference in aesthetic orientation caused by a difference in individual senses. Someone also proposed that modern calligraphy should be the outcome of grasping calligraphy intuitively after a rational analysis of it. Only thus can the distance between modern calligraphy and traditional calligraphy be enlarged. Moreover, releasing the mind is the essence of modern calligraphy.

Different slogans affect traditional calligraphy art in different ways. It is worth pointing out that there is a paradox behind these theories. Firstly, the frame of reference is based on Western art theories, especially post-modernism. It is the result of rationalism in the Western countries. Actually, Chinese art is traditionally biased against rationality and pays more attention to intuition. When an outstanding calligrapher creates an artwork after extensive training, under Western art theory he releases his feelings without unconscious inhibition. In fact, lately there have been no breakthroughs in the theory of modern calligraphy, and no successful calligraphy work has been produced recently. This problem is worth considering. We have enough reason to say that the innovation of present calligraphy can't achieve satisfying results unless we have grasped the spirit of traditional calligraphy. A simple change in the calligraphy form is not enough. We support pioneering research into modern calligraphy. We care about the way to do such an exploration. Pursuing irrationalism won't be the way out for Chinese calligraphy. In a relatively long period of time, traditional styles of calligraphy will coexist with new modern expressions derived from traditional calligraphy. And we should consider each type of traditional calligraphy with thoroughness and care, and then explore new theories and create modern calligraphy works in a more rational way. Unfortunately, this is not an easy affair. ●

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