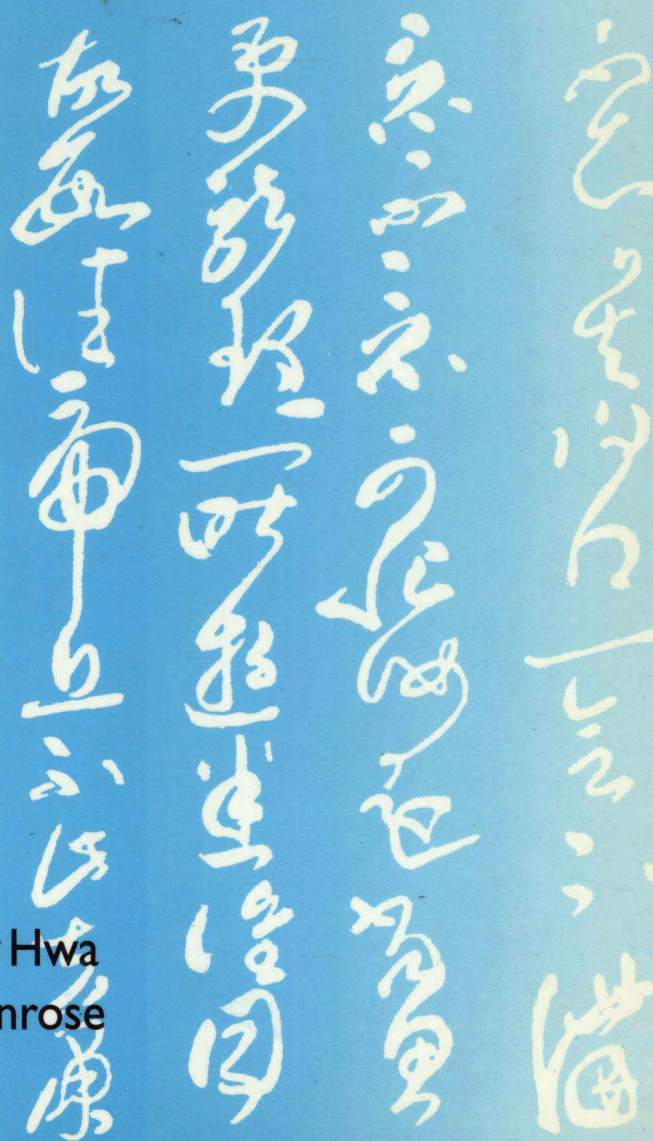


BEHIND THE BRUSHSTROKES

Tales from Chinese Calligraphy



Khoo Seow Hwa
Nancy L. Penrose

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*First published in 1993 by
Graham Brash Pte Ltd
85 Genting Lane, #05-01
Guan Hua Warehouse Building
Singapore 349569*

ISBN 9971-49-284-9

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Reprinted in 1993 and 1996

*Cover design by K.H. Teo
Typeset by Points Prepress Service
Printed in Singapore by General Printing Services Pte Ltd*

BEHIND THE BRUSHSTROKES



FOREWORD I

Chinese calligraphy is perhaps the most exacting of Chinese art forms: it imposes stringent demands on the practitioner in terms of diligence, patience, and a good sense of proportion.

Each Chinese character has a definite form and style. In a good piece of Chinese calligraphy, the size and form of the characters must not only conform to a particular style of writing but the horizontal and vertical spacing between the characters must be proportionately correct to give them a sense of rhythm and beauty. Further, a Chinese calligrapher has to distill the distinctive features of the Chinese characters through adroit brushwork.

Besides dexterity in the use of the brush, a Chinese calligrapher must be proficient in Chinese language and literature, as the subject of a calligraphic work is usually a couplet, a poem, a famous saying or quotation from a Chinese classic. Hence an interest in Chinese calligraphy will help one better appreciate Chinese history and culture.

Much has been written on the development of Chinese calligraphy. However, these publications are mostly written for the Chinese reader. This book will fill a gap – catering to enthusiasts of Chinese calligraphy who are not knowledgeable about Chinese language and culture. I commend Khoo Seow Hwa and Nancy Penrose for their joint effort in bringing out this useful and timely publication, *Behind the Brushstrokes: Tales from Chinese Calligraphy*.



Professor Tommy Koh
Chairman
National Arts Council
Singapore
October 1991

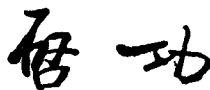
FOREWORD II

Mr Khoo Seow Hwa of Singapore, a well-recognized calligrapher, is highly regarded for his knowledge of Chinese calligraphy. Because he is both scholar and practitioner, his accomplishments reach beyond the bounds of academics.

Recently, Mr Khoo and Ms Nancy Penrose, an American writer and fellow admirer of Chinese calligraphy, completed their book, *Behind the Brushstrokes*, which is a comprehensive study of Chinese calligraphy. Their book provides great insight into the evolution of Chinese characters, as well as the philosophy of Chinese calligraphy and the lives of some of the great Chinese calligraphers.

Upon reading their book, I am deeply touched and moved by their dedication to their work, namely that of presenting the art of Chinese calligraphy in a form that is understandable even to those readers who may know little about Chinese art or culture. Their book is an important contribution not only to the art of Chinese calligraphy, but also to the preservation of Chinese heritage.

— *Translated and adapted by the authors.*

A stylized calligraphic signature in black ink, consisting of two main characters, '齐' (Qi) and '功' (Gong), written in a fluid, expressive cursive style.

Professor Qi Gong
Beijing Normal University
President, Association of
Chinese Master Calligraphers
The People's Republic of China
October 1991

AUTHOR'S NOTE I

"A journey of ten thousand miles begins with one small step."

As with all art forms, Chinese calligraphy holds great rewards for both artist and audience. The artist has a passion for the art and finds deep satisfaction in its practice, while viewers find pleasure in appreciating an exquisite piece of calligraphy or in watching a calligrapher at work.

Chinese brushwritten calligraphy has produced a distinctive art form that enhances the literal meanings of words. Although other writing tools, such as ballpoint pens, are widely available today, there is no substitute for the soft and responsive brush of Chinese calligraphy. In the hands of a master calligrapher, the brush opens up a fantastic array of artistic opportunities: the flow of black ink onto white paper, the twist of the brush, the delicate timing of a lift or a turn on a stroke are all fascinating. Chinese calligraphy can create the impression of music without sound, a melody for the eyes, as characters flow one after another in a rhythmic and pleasing pattern. One cannot resist falling for such beauty.

Understanding the structure and evolution of Chinese characters is essential to their appreciation. An audience that possesses a basic knowledge of the different styles in Chinese calligraphy will be able to more fully appreciate and understand what they are viewing. Taking up the practice of calligraphy leads one even further down the path of understanding and serves to greatly expand one's appreciation for the skill and discipline required to create a masterpiece. A viewer who has never taken brush in hand is like the person who thinks he or she can learn to swim without getting wet.

Nancy L. Penrose, who is in Singapore for a short stay, has a keen interest in Chinese arts and culture. I was deeply impressed by her fervent desire to further her knowledge in these fields. Not

content with just attending my classes on Chinese calligraphy, she traveled to China to see for herself ancient calligraphic inscriptions. Her conscientiousness, modesty, and enthusiasm contributed greatly to the success of our collaboration.

I would like to express my appreciation to her for the pleasure of writing this book together. Our mutual appreciation and understanding of the art of calligraphy led us to attempt to blend the values of Eastern ideology with Western thought. The writing involved transposing philosophies across cultural boundaries, generating new terminology, deliberating on the translation of ancient Chinese proverbs, and transforming scholarly concepts into popular language. Ultimately this book reflects the important role that calligraphy plays in each of our lives.

As the Chinese saying goes, the ten-thousand-mile journey begins with a small step. Nancy Penrose and I have taken this one small step. I sincerely hope that it will serve as a bridge to link the West with the East, thus opening the door for future international cultural exchange so that more people may reap the fruits of friendship and understanding through the arts.

Khoo Seow Hwa

邱少華

AUTHOR'S NOTE II

I remember the precise moment that my imagination was captured by the art of Chinese calligraphy: I was sitting in Khoo Seow Hwa's class at the National University of Singapore, listening to him describe the ancient masters of the art. Suddenly it struck me that he was the modern-day representative of an artistic heritage that reached back, unbroken, for an incredible 5,000 years. I looked around at my Chinese classmates and realized that they too shared in this direct connection to their culture's past.

As an American whose historical identity rests with pioneers who arrived in the western United States only within the last one hundred and fifty years, I find the length and continuity of Chinese history awe-inspiring. It was perhaps with a slight twinge of envy that I grasped Khoo Seow Hwa's role in this ancient art form that is such a vital expression of Chinese culture.

I therefore felt privileged to be invited to collaborate on this book, for it not only allowed me the opportunity to learn even more from Mr Khoo's vast knowledge of Chinese history, culture and art, but also to share, if just a small bit, in that long and venerable history. The writing of this book has, therefore, been a continuation of the learning process that began in his class. This book represents a point of intersection between two cultures where we, as representatives of the East and West, met on the common grounds of universal values and mutual respect.

I wish to thank Mr Khoo for his patience with this American novice who showed up for his class, never stopping to consider that it might be a handicap not to read, write, or speak any form of Chinese. His encouragement allowed me to learn to appreciate the beauty of the art and to even, once in a great while, write a character that was good enough to surprise both of us.

Nancy L. Penrose

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Forewords by Professors Tommy Koh & Qi Gong

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I

INTRODUCTION

What is Chinese Calligraphy?

Chinese calligraphy is the art of brushwritten Chinese characters, expressive lines and dots made possible by a soft and supple brush in the hands of a skilled user. It is an art form that goes far beyond the mere act of putting words on paper and has been called "ink dancing" for the lively and beautiful rhythms that can be put into simple lines and dots of black ink on white paper. It is music without sound.

The practice of Chinese calligraphy requires a keen eye for composition and balance. Master calligraphers possess an intimate knowledge of the possibilities offered by brushes that respond to the movements of the writer's hand as sensitively as wind-chimes to a breeze. They have an intuitive understanding of Chinese philosophy and literature grounded in many years of study and they are able to attain a quiet, meditative frame of mind before writing in order to open themselves to their inner voices and emotions.

Behind the Brushstrokes

The stories of the great masters of Chinese calligraphy, the tales behind the brushstrokes, provide some of the most entertaining and valuable insights into the history and practice of the art. These masters have included emperors and poor scholars, court officers and woodcarvers, many with colorful and eccentric personalities. For example, one calligrapher, nicknamed "Crazy Zhang", dipped

his hair into ink and used his head as a brush to write on the walls of his house.

Zhang was inspired to create some of his finest work after watching the fluid and graceful movements of a woman dancing. Other calligraphers have found inspiration in the beauty of nature or in the company of good friends. The greatest masterpiece of Chinese calligraphy, the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, was created by Wang Xizhi on a lovely spring afternoon in the city of Shaoxing. There, beside a small stream, twenty-six of Wang's friends and fellow scholars had gathered for a day of drinking wine and composing poetry. Drunk with the wine, as well as the pleasure of the day, Wang seized a brush and wrote a composition in honor of the occasion, a philosophical discourse on the meaning and the passage of life. Today, more than 1,600 years after its creation, students of calligraphy still practice from this famous work.

The Quiet Mind

The practice of Chinese calligraphy begins with a quiet mind. The noisy left side of the brain, so concerned with the passage of time and mundane tasks needing to be done, must be calmed and quieted so that the artistically-inclined and creative right side of the brain may take over. The ideal state of mind is one that is calm, able to focus and to concentrate. One famous Chinese calligrapher from the 15th century said that he practiced his art because it composed his mind, harmonized his emotions, and tuned his nature.

Perhaps it is because of this frame of mind that so many Chinese calligraphers live to a ripe old age, still practicing calligraphy and improving daily, well into their 90s. There is a Chinese saying that the practice of calligraphy is like eating a long piece of sugar cane: the cane becomes sweeter as one eats from the young top down to the older bottom and root. So it is that a calligrapher improves with age, as years and years of practice merge to produce a mature style of one's own.

The Chinese also believe that the practice of calligraphy has the power to improve a person's character. Certainly, for any calligrapher, the happiest time of day is when he or she is practicing calligraphy and the feeling of satisfaction upon completing a good piece of work is highly rewarding.

A Mirror of the Past

The history of Chinese calligraphy is nearly as long as the history of China itself, beginning more than 5,000 years ago. Through the centuries, through dynasties, wars, earthquakes, floods and famines, the art of calligraphy has evolved, changed, and grown. It has been influenced by the artistic tastes of emperors and empresses, by the eclectic personalities of notorious artists, by the careful and dedicated work of scholars.

Chinese calligraphy, as seen and practiced today, is a mirror of these changes, reflecting images from centuries long past. On the streets and in the shops of Beijing today, a lover of calligraphy may purchase works where the same word is written one hundred different ways in a script developed more than 2,500 years ago, before standardization had occurred. In another piece one discovers a character taken from the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*. A third scroll, a serious and solemn proclamation, is written in a style created in the first century for government documents.

There are six basic styles of Chinese calligraphy in use today whose development spans the history of the art. Using the character "fu" (福), which means good fortune, Figure 1 provides a comparison of several styles.

The Importance of Calligraphy in Chinese Life

Because brushwritten characters are an integral part of Chinese life, any Chinese village, town, or city will be filled with calligraphy. Good calligraphers are in demand because business people believe that a well-written sign outside their shop or restau-



Fig. 1. The Chinese character for "fu" written in several different calligraphic styles. "Fu" means good luck.

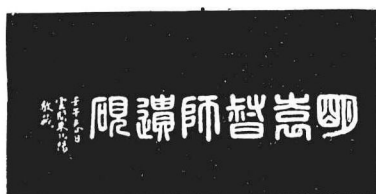


Fig. 2. Calligraphy on memorial tablets.

rant will bring them good fortune. Neither the ballpoint pen nor machine-produced printing has served as a substitute for brushwritten calligraphy.

Calligraphic signs and banners hang outside most shops and restaurants. Street signs are often written in calligraphy. Private homes have quotations from great poets and philosophers written on

scrolls hung on the walls. Tombstones and other memorials (Figure 2) are decorated with calligraphy engraved into stone. Calligraphy even appears on the sides of mountains, where two or four characters of huge proportions may be carved into a stone cliff for all to view and appreciate. Far from being the equivalent of western-style "grafitti", this type of writing in public places is seen to enhance the appreciation of a place of beauty, such as a river gorge or a mountainside.