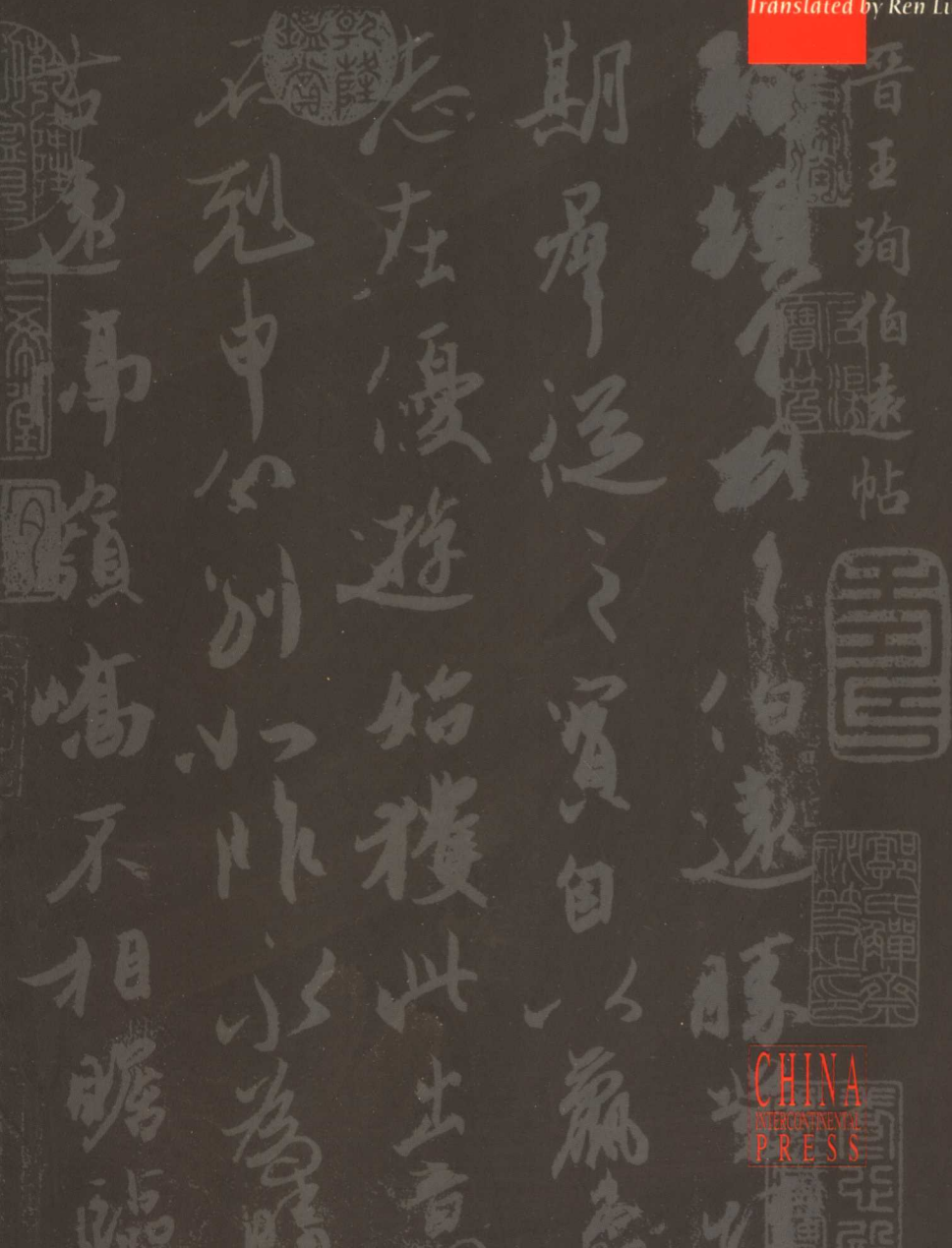


Chen Tingyou
Chinese
Calligraphy

● Cultural China Series

Translated by Ren Lingjuan



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INTERCONTINENTAL
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Calligraphy: A Cultural Treasure of China

Calligraphy is the quintessence of Chinese culture. There have emerged some 1,000 kinds of written languages in the world. First, they were used to record events and what people wanted to say. In writing, people strive to make the scripts look beautiful and elegant. To meet special needs, they are written in artistic styles. The writing of Chinese characters has been developed into a special high-level art. Chinese calligraphy has flourished for several thousand years. Like painting, sculpture, poetry, music, dance and opera, it is a full member of the family of arts.

Calligraphy can be found everywhere in China, and is closely linked to daily life. In addition, it leads other arts in the number of people who practice it.

Signboards with inscriptions by famous figures are often found in shops and shopping centers, adding an antique elegance to busy and noisy trading areas.

Calligraphic works also decorate sitting rooms, studies and bedrooms. The Chinese characters are written on Xuan paper which is good at absorbing ink. The work will be



A traditional sitting room of a scholar.

pasted on a piece of thick paper with a silk edge, and then mounted on a scroll or put into a picture frame for hanging on a wall. Usually, the calligraphic work contains a poem, a pair of couplets or a motto the host likes very much. If the calligraphic work is written by the host himself, it will demonstrates his aspiration and interest as well as his literary or artistic talent. A calligraphic work can bring

vitality to a white wall, pleasing to guests and friends.

Spring Festival couplets are calligraphic works produced specially for the celebration of the Spring Festival, the most important traditional festival of the Chinese people. Written on red paper, such couplets are posted on gateposts, door panels, walls or columns of houses. The characters on the couplets always express good wishes for the year.

Characters in special styles appear as masthead inscriptions for newspapers or magazines, or as the titles of books. The six characters meaning the People's Bank of China on Chinese banknotes were written by a famous calligrapher. The calligraphic characters or paintings on folded fans demonstrate the elegance of the user. It is no exaggeration to say that the Chinese people have an indissoluble bond with calligraphy. The first photo album of a newborn baby has congratulations written by his elders with brush and ink; when he gets married, the pillow cases are embroidered with the



A running-style calligraphic work by Pan Boying on a fan covering.



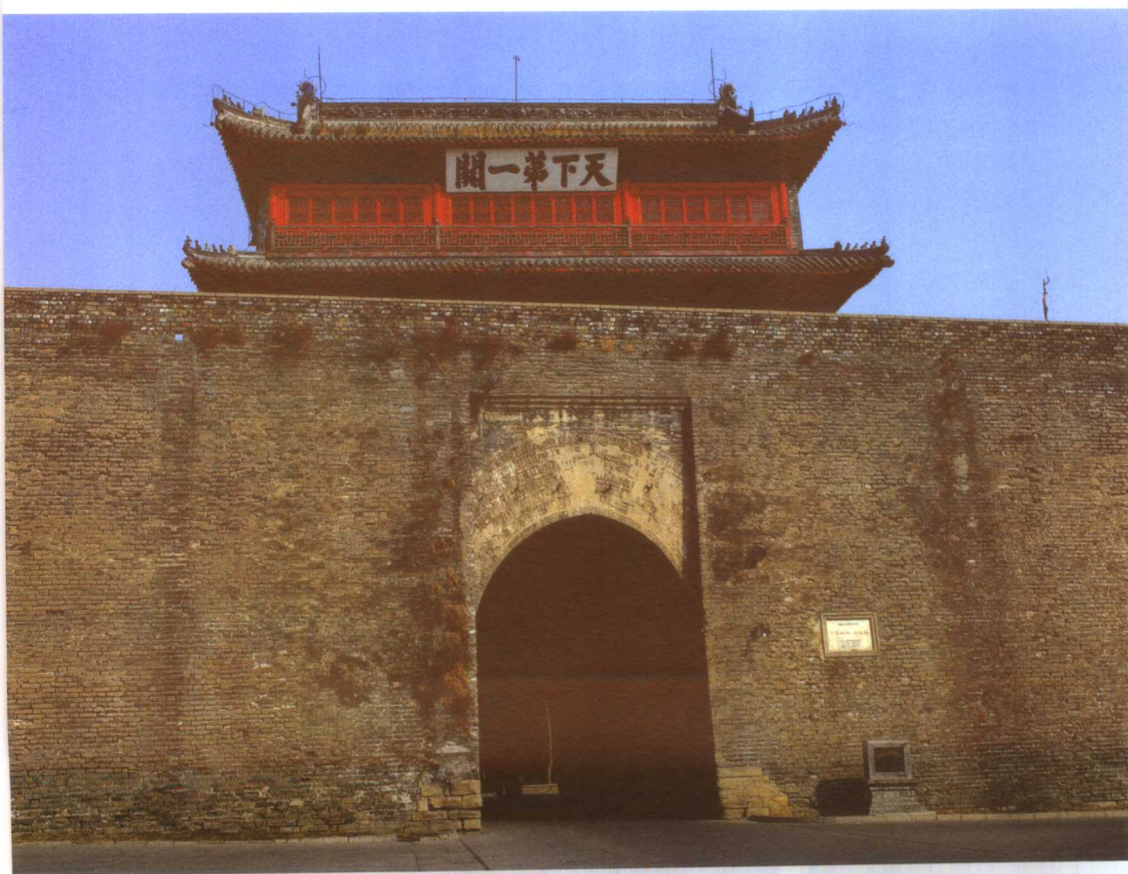
A pair of Spring Festival couplets and New Year pictures on the main gate of a house.

“double happiness” symbol in calligraphic style; on his birthday, a big character meaning “longevity” in a calligraphic style is hung up in the house. After his death, the inscription on the memorial tablet in front of his tomb is written by a calligrapher.

Tourists can see calligraphic works in pavilions, towers and buildings in various scenic spots. Such calligraphic



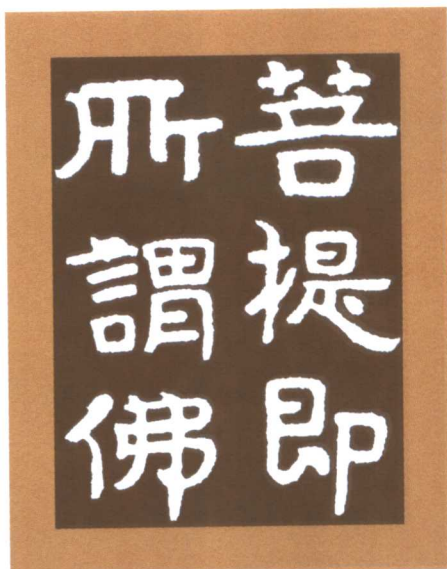
The gate-tower of the Shanhai Pass and the horizontal plaque.



inscriptions on wooden boards or rocks integrate harmoniously with the surrounding scenery, and add radiance and beauty to it. The gate-tower of the Shanhai Pass at the eastern end of the Great Wall, 300 kilometers away from Beijing, was built in 1381. From the tower, tourists can have a bird's-eye view of the sea and magnificent mountains. Under the eaves of the gate-tower is a horizontal plaque inscribed with five huge Chinese characters meaning "The First Pass Under Heaven." They were written by the famous calligrapher Xiao Xian of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The plaque matches the magnificent scenery around.

If you visit Mount Taishan in Shandong Province, you can visit the Sutra Stone Valley to the east of Longquan Peak, where, on a flat 6,000-square-meter rock, a calligrapher carved the text of the Buddhist Diamond Sutra in the sixth century, each character measuring 35 square centimeters, and the largest one measuring 50 square centimeters. However, only 1,067 of the 3,017 original characters are legible.

In Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, your guide will take you to visit the Orchid Pavilion, a Mecca for calligraphers in China. On a spring day in 353, Wang Xizhi, who later became one of China's most distinguished calligraphers, and 40 other men of letters gathered at the Orchid Pavilion to



Part of the text of the Buddhist Diamond Sutra in the Sutra Stone Valley.

法時帶左右引以爲流觴曲水
列坐其次雖無絲竹管絃之
盛一觴一詠上足以暢叙幽情
是日也天朗氣清惠風和暢仰
觀宇宙之大俯察品類之盛
所以遊目騁懷足以極視聽之
娛信可樂也夫人之相與俯仰



永和九年



永和九年歲在癸丑暮春之初會

于會稽山陰之蘭亭脩契事

也羣賢畢至少長咸集此地



有崇山峻領茂林脩竹又有清流激

Preface for the "Collection of Orchid Pavilion Poems" written by Wang Xizhi of the Jin Dynasty.



compose poems while drinking wine. Wang Xizhi wrote a 324-character *Preface for the Collection of Orchid Pavilion Poems* on the spot with his beautiful calligraphy, making the Orchid Pavilion famous. His calligraphy has been praised as the "first running hand under Heaven." Unfortunately, the original of the preface was buried

together with Li Shimin, the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty, who was also a fine calligrapher. The preface we see today is a copy done by Feng Chengsu of the Tang Dynasty.

The Forest of Steles in the ancient capital city of Xi'an is the oldest and best collection in China and a treasure house of ancient Chinese calligraphy, art, classics and stone engraving. More than 2,000 inscribed tablets and memorial tablets from tombs and pavilions of the Han and Tang dynasties are displayed in exhibition halls, galleries and pavilions. First built in 1087, the Forest of Steles is a part of the Shaanxi Provincial Museum, and a cultural site under state protection.

There are rigorous standards and criteria for assessing calligraphic skills and works. The calligraphic



A picture of Lu Xun (1881-1936), a great writer of China.



A running-script letter by Lu Xun.

skills demonstrate the cultural background, artistic level and sentiments of the calligrapher. Through the ages, many of famous calligraphers have been painters, thinkers, politicians or scholars too. When talking about a person's achievements in calligraphy, his achievements in other fields are always mentioned. Excellent calligraphic works are held to demonstrate outstanding ability and great learning.

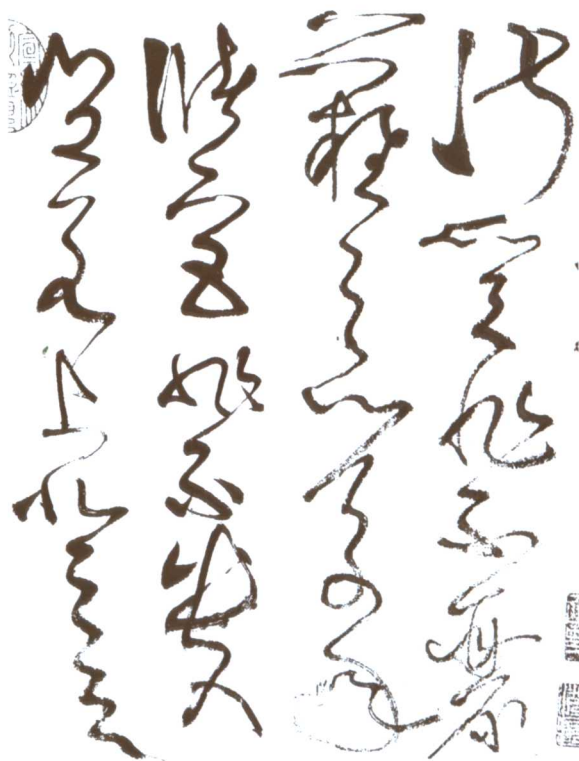
Calligraphy is the first artistic endeavor the Chinese people learn. While teaching children to read characters, parents and teachers not only show them the strokes, they also try to arouse their aesthetic consciousness and develop their artistic judgment and creation. This is helpful for their future lives.

People call calligraphy "painting without images, a piece of music without sounds, a stage without actors and actresses and a building without components and materials." Calligraphic works express various essential factors of beauty – balance, proportion, variety, continuity, contrast, movement, change and harmony – through the different shapes and forms of the lines, their combinations and ways of movement. Calligraphy has also inspired other arts, and vice versa.

Like music, calligraphy has rhythm as its main element. The dots and strokes in thick and light ink or in round or square shapes demonstrate obvious rhythms, like changing and moving musical rhythms, expressing the surging thoughts and emotions of the calligrapher and musician alike. It is no wonder that

calligraphy theorists praise calligraphic works as being like “music in the air” or as “a wonderful piece of music played by an excellent musician.”

Also, calligraphic works can demonstrate the beauty of both the body and movement, like the art of dance. Both have artistic features concerning the space and time. Calligraphy and dance can absorb inspiration from each other. Zhang Xu, a cursive-script calligraphy master of the Tang Dynasty, was famous for distinctive rhythms and a



Part of the *Four Models of Calligraphy of Classical Poems*, by Zhang Xu.

wild style. Legend says that he made swift progress in his calligraphy after he got inspiration from a dance performed by the famous dancer Gongsun. Through distinctive rhythms and neat movements, the dancer demonstrates various kinds of charms and emotions such as vividness, joy, sadness, anger, aspiration, demand, boldness and inspiration. The cursive-script calligraphic works by Zhang Xu, the poems by Li Bai and the sword dance by Pei Min were praised as three wonders by the emperor of their time. The *Four Models of Calligraphy of Classical Poems* is one of the few calligraphic works by Zhang Xu handed down by history. The



A wash painting, *Shrimps*, by Qi Baishi.

characters used in this work are bold and unrestrained, and linked together like one character. The space between the characters varies greatly.

In the 1980s, a television station in Beijing broadcast an artistic program entitled “Ink Dance,” which demonstrated the arts of calligraphy and dance at the same time. With the background of a calligraphic work, the dancer presented the dance movements according to the meanings and shapes of the characters. The light steps, soft waist movements and gentle music stimulated the audience’s imagination.

Calligraphy has an even closer relation with traditional Chinese painting. Both use brushes and Xuan paper; the difference is that the former uses black ink only, while the latter uses various kinds of colors. Calligraphy, as a kind of art, exists together with the other arts. In bookstores, calligraphic works are sold together with paintings. At some exhibitions, calligraphic works are on display together with paintings. Usually, a painter leaves some space for a calligrapher to write a classical poem or poetic

lines related to the scenes and objects appearing on the picture in order to increase its attraction. The picture will be more charming and tasteful if it bears a poem created and written by the painter himself or herself. In the past, an artist who was good at poetry, calligraphy and painting was called a “person with three wonderful talents.” Since the Tang Dynasty, each historical period has produced many such talented people.

Calligraphy and painting have many skills to exchange. Traditional painting has drawn inspiration from calligraphy in using brush and ink, especially in the field of abstract implications and freeing itself from shackles of concrete objects. Chinese wash painting originated in the simple but smooth brush strokes of calligraphy. Qi Baishi's paintings of shrimps are good examples of such wash paintings. Qi sketches shrimps with a few simple strokes, using different shades of ink. Without any concrete depiction of water, people can visualize the murmuring stream, and smell the refreshing fragrance of water.

The guiding and leading position of calligraphy with regard to various kinds of arts is like that of the mathematics among the various natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry, geology and meteorology. In general, mathematical theory is abstract but profoundly reflects the relations between space and mathematics. So all schools have paid great attention to education in mathematics, and natural scientists have relied on sound mathematical knowledge to study the profound mysteries and master the principles of the natural sciences they are engaged in. Talking about this reminds me of a celebrated dictum of Lao Zi, the great Taoist philosopher who lived 2,500 years ago: “The Tao (Way) is mysterious and profound, and is the door to various wonders.” Here I apply his dictum to Chinese calligraphy, which I see as mysterious and profound, and is the door to various kinds of arts.