

Ishikawa Kyuyoh
translated by Waku Miller

The drama of the *chisel* *stylus* in Oriental *calligraphy*

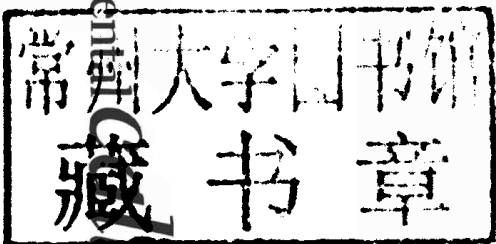
Uchiwa



LTCB International Library Trust/International H

Taction

The drama of the *chisel*
stylus in oriental
Calligraphy



Ishikawa Kyuyoh

translated by Waku Miller

This book originally appeared in Japanese as *Sho: Hisshoku no Uchu o Yomitoku* (Tokyo: Chuo Koron Shinsha, 2005). International House of Japan retains the English-language translation rights under contract with Ishikawa Kyuyoh and through the courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha.

© 2011 International House of Japan

All rights reserved by International House of Japan. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except for brief quotations in critical articles and reviews.

First English edition published March 2011 by International House of Japan
11-16, Roppongi 5-chōme, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-0032, Japan
Tel: +81-3-3470-9271 Fax: +81-3-3470-9368
E-mail: ihj@i-house.or.jp

Printed in Japan
ISBN 978-4-924971-31-8

Author's Preface to the English Edition

I am grateful to the LTCB International Library Trust for selecting a book of mine to issue in English translation and to International House of Japan for undertaking the translation and publishing. This fulfills a long-standing desire to share my calligraphic perspective with a non-Japanese-speaking audience. The book comprises content that I presented in a series of 12 monthly lectures at Kyoto Seika University from September 2001 to August 2002. It appeared in Japanese in 2005 as *Sho—Hisshoku no Uchu wo Yomitoku* (Calligraphy—Parsing the Universe of Taction [Tokyo: Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc.]).

This book is an effort to elucidate the mechanism by which calligraphy arises and attains expression as an artistic medium. Few people outside the world of calligraphy know much about the medium. They might know, for example, that calligraphers use round brushes, as opposed to the flat brushes common in oil painting. But for most, East Asian calligraphy is no more than a matter of drawing kanji ideographs and, in Japan, hiragana syllabary characters with a brush. I have endeavored in this book to carry the reader beyond that superficial understanding. My approach is frequently comparative, drawing on musical and painterly examples to place calligraphy in an artistic context.

Critical analysis of the aesthetics of calligraphy has received little attention in the West and is underdeveloped in East Asia, too. That neglect would seem to be at least partly attributable to the curious relationship between calligraphic aesthetics and language. Language unfolds, of course, as a written medium and as an aural medium. People accustomed to phonetic, alphabetic languages naturally expect

a consistent linkage between words as written and as pronounced. The linkage between text and speech is frequently ambiguous, however, in the kanji cultures of East Asia.

In Japanese, we can read the two characters for “spring wind,” 春風, as *shumpu* or as *harukaze*, and the meaning is essentially the same with either reading. One person would look at the character combination and read it as *shumpu*, and another, equally literate person would read the same combination as *harukaze*. Meanwhile, we can render the combination phonetically in either the hiragana syllabary, as はるかぜ (*ha ru ka ze*), or in the katakana syllabary, where it appears as ハルカゼ (see pages 71 to 73 for a discussion of the hiragana and katakana syllabaries). The pronunciation is identical in either rendering, and the meaning is essentially identical.

Thus does Japanese incorporate structural elements that govern language primarily as a written medium and only secondarily as a spoken medium. Those structural elements reflect the writing-oriented evolution of language in East Asia. In China, on the Korean peninsula, and in Vietnam, kanji begat ideographic text, which begat prose and verse in which the written word took precedence over speech. We in Japan imported kanji and invented syllabaries to assist in grafting our native language onto the kanji substrate.

Calligraphy occupies a central position in artistic expression in the kanji cultures of East Asia. That position corresponds, as I describe in chapter 1, to the position of music in the alphabetic cultures of the West. Conversely, we find a more-suitable analog for Oriental music in the calligraphy, rather than the music, of the West. The decorative flourishes of Western calligraphy correspond to the role of spoken language in East Asia: decorative nuance for a language rooted in writing.

Understanding the preeminence of writing over speech in the kanji cultures is essential in grasping the philosophy and the aesthetics of East Asian calligraphy. That understanding is also essential in grasping the need for accompanying kanji with the hiragana and katakana syllabaries in Japanese.

As I have noted, kanji all have multiple readings in Japanese: a reading that mimics the Chinese pronunciation of the kanji; a reading that corresponds to the native Japanese language as spoken before the introduction of kanji; and, frequently but not always, other readings. In our “spring wind” example, the *shumpu* reading mimics the Chinese pronunciation, and the *harukaze* reading corresponds to words that might have existed before the arrival of kanji.

I characterized the relationship between the different readings as “essentially” identical. The “Chinese” and “Japanese” readings for any word are so close in meaning as to match the same dictionary definitions, but they frequently differ in nuance. Understanding those differences in nuance is essential in grasping the subtleties of expression that are a defining characteristic of Japanese.

In our example, the *shumpu* reading of the kanji combination for “spring wind” conveys a cooler, more-distanced, more-abstract nuance than the *harukaze* reading. The *harukaze* reading, on the other hand, conveys a warmer, more-immediate, more-concrete nuance.

East Asian calligraphy is an expressive medium rooted deeply in the writing-oriented languages of the kanji cultures of the region. Underlying its aesthetics is the essence of the act of writing. And we need to recognize the origins of that essence in the historical interplay between carving stone with a chisel and applying ink with a brush. That interplay has unfolded in an ever so tactile dimension, and I therefore use the term “taction” for what is commonly but inadequately described as “brushwork.”

My overriding concern in this book has been to elucidate the aesthetics of calligraphy as the drama of taction. And I hope that readers in the English-speaking world will thereby gain some insight of interest into the aesthetic structure of that drama. I will be delighted if that insight prompts readers to reexamine the aesthetic possibilities for taction in handwriting in English and other alphabetic languages.

Ishikawa Kyuyoh

Tokyo
February 2011

Translator's Introduction

You have in your hands an unprecedented account of the history of East Asian calligraphy. Here is a book every bit as accessible and fascinating for noncalligraphers and for individuals unversed in kanji as it is for calligraphers and for kanji-literate readers. The author, Ishikawa Kyuyoh, speaks of “the drama of the stylus,” both brush and chisel, and he brings that drama alive by positioning it in compelling context: historical and spiritual, as well as artistic and cultural.

Ishikawa has been a leading light in the calligraphic firmament for more than 40 years. He has continuously highlighted new expressive possibilities through work that is at once avant-garde and firmly rooted in calligraphic tradition.

Underlying Ishikawa's work as an artist and as a teacher, lecturer, and author is a devout spirituality. “Expressive activity unaccompanied by spiritual awareness is mere play,” Ishikawa declares. “Calligraphy,” he emphasizes, “has roots in religious faith and has developed through a spirituality that transcends theistic religion. That spirituality is a powerful discipline for calligraphers. And we need to make the creative most of that discipline by comprehending the historical and aesthetic essence of our art.”

As interpreted by Ishikawa, calligraphy's spiritual orientation engenders a powerful creative tension. “The calligrapher's tension,” he insists, “is part of the spiritual awareness that is inseparable from the act of writing. It is the unrelenting self-scrutiny of the calligrapher who would fulfill a commitment akin to a holy vow.”

Calligraphy is famously an art of space and positioning, of margin. For Ishikawa, a blank sheet of paper is an analog for the space-time occupied by the cosmos. He draws frequently on environmental

terminology in discussing the parameters of calligraphy; for example: "We humans, almost alone in the animal kingdom, experience our environment through tools, and the brush is a quintessential tool. Just as the tools of human industry and lifestyles transform our environment, the calligrapher's brush and ink transform their medium. Bringing a brush down onto a virgin sheet of paper is a momentous act. I hope to convey in this book a sense of the profound responsibility that calligraphers undertake."

Ishikawa brings a full measure of deductive research findings to bear in elucidating calligraphy's artistic, cultural, historical, and spiritual context. What readers will find even more stimulating, however, are his inductive leaps of insight. Brush in hand, Ishikawa speculates intuitively and knowledgeably about how calligraphic scripts evolved. Especially thought provoking is his theory about the mutual influence of brushwork and chisel work in the development of *kaishu* (block) script.

The attentive reader will find numerous assertions in this book that challenge long and widely held assumptions about the evolution of calligraphy. Some readers will disagree with some of Ishikawa's interpretations. All readers, however, will find a wealth of fresh perspective on calligraphic history and aesthetics.

Please note that the author's primary intention in this book is to provide a basic introduction to calligraphic aesthetics. This is not a "how-to" textbook for teaching and learning calligraphic technique. And I have tried to avoid technical terms in translating Ishikawa's text into English. That has resulted in wordier descriptions of brushstrokes, for example, than might have been necessary for a specialized audience.

I hope that the nontechnical descriptions will make the intricacies of brushwork more graspable for nonspecialist readers. And I hope that experienced calligraphers will look beyond the generalized phrasing and enjoy the calligraphically sophisticated narrative that underlies the author's commentary.

As Ishikawa notes in the Author's Preface, this book originated as a lecture series. The author edited the lecture texts for publication, and I have made further additions and revisions to accommodate non-Japanese readers.

My changes have included abandoning the spoken tone of the original and eliminating some of the redundancy that is inevitable in a lecture series. I have retained some redundancy, however, as necessary to preserve the structural integrity of individual chapters.

People new to calligraphy are frequently surprised at how little the meaning of the text figures in calligraphic execution. Rarely does the matter of textual meaning arise at all in discussions of calligraphic creation or appreciation. That is one reason I have not provided full English translations of the texts that appear in the calligraphic examples. Another reason is that most of the examples are portions of works and would not necessarily be comprehensible, even if translated.

On the other hand, perusing page after page of utterly incomprehensible writing can be discomfiting. So I have supplemented the author's original text with additional background information about the works presented. And I have provided English translations for some, though not all, of the individual characters discussed. Those translations are far from sufficient to allow for reading the texts, but they will hopefully alleviate some of the discomfiture of examining characters that would otherwise convey no meaning at all.

The names of Chinese and Japanese individuals, living and dead, appear in the traditional sequence: surname followed by given name (or their corresponding pen names or religious names, etc.). In subsequent references to repeatedly cited individuals, I have used whichever name is more familiar: usually, but not always, the surname. "Wang Xizhi" thus becomes "Wang," except where necessary to distinguish one Wang from another.

Japanese names are more problematic in this regard. Some Japanese figures are better known by their given names. Thus do I refer to Fujiwara-no-Kozei, for example, as "Kozei." The Zen master

Ikkyu Sojun, on the other hand, is better known by his surname equivalent, so I have referred to him as Ikkyu in repeated references.

I have used pinyin for the alphabetic renderings of all of the Chinese names and terms. And I have accompanied the pinyin transliteration with the Wade-Giles rendering where the latter is notably more familiar. The Tang dynasty poet Li Bai (pinyin), for instance, is better known in the English-speaking world as Li Po (Wade-Giles), so I offer both renderings at first reference in each chapter.

Anyone interested in East Asian culture owes a huge debt to Ishikawa Kyuyoh for his penetrating insights from a calligraphic perspective. I join everyone at the LTCB (Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan) International Library Trust and at International House of Japan, Inc., in thanking Ishikawa for this opportunity to present his commentary in English and for the assistance that he has provided generously throughout the project. We are also grateful to Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc., the publisher of the original, Japanese edition for permission to publish this English edition.

Liu Huimin furnished invaluable assistance in providing translations and commentary for the Chinese texts that appear in the examples. Howard Brandt served above and beyond the call of duty in handling the proofreading and editing. Howard has handled similar duties for several books published by the International House of Japan. This job, however, was more daunting than any previous project. It presented challenges that would have overwhelmed a lesser editor. Howard labored heroically in improving comprehensibility in the descriptions of brushstrokes and in ensuring accuracy in the countless historical references.

My clumsy phrasing and chronic carelessness are far too immense for any editor or even for an army of editors to overcome completely. The errors, inconsistencies, and other shortcomings that surely remain in the following translation are my responsibility alone.

Waku Miller

Tokyo

February 2011

Gallery: Works by the Author

The author emphasizes that continuing evolution is essential to the vitality of calligraphy or any art form. In this book, Ishikawa highlights the technical and aesthetic advances achieved by the great calligraphers of the past. He shows how they have honored and nourished calligraphic traditions by augmenting those traditions with new breakthroughs.

A commitment to continuing evolution is readily evident in the author's own calligraphy. Ishikawa achieves stunning effects in rendering classic texts and even news items in a highly contemporary idiom. Here are some examples.

Page xix

Hojoki No. 5; portion, 1988

Sumi ink on paper, 109.0 cm x 90.0 cm

“Hojoki,” which means a Buddhist monk’s hut, is the title of a famous essay by the Buddhist recluse Kamo-no-Chomei (1153 or 1155–1216).

Pages xx–xxi

Tan-nisho; portion, 1988

Sumi ink on paper, 92.0 cm x 56.5 cm

Tan-nisho is a brief and brilliantly written summary of the teachings of Shinran (1155–1263), the founder of Japan’s Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) school of Buddhism. Its authorship is uncertain, though most scholars credit the work to the Shinran disciple Kawawada-no-Yuien (1222–1289). The name means lamentations, and the work is available widely in English under that and other titles.

Pages xxii–xxiii

Karamazofu no Kyodai 1 (The Brothers Karamazov 1); portion, 1999

Sumi ink on paper, 95.0 cm x 60.6 cm

Pages xxiv–xxv

Genji Monogatari—Shii-ga-Moto (The Tale of Genji—Beneath the Beech Tree); 2008

Sumi ink on paper, 47.0 cm x 60.6 cm

“Beneath the Beech Tree” is a chapter in the latter part of the 11th-century classic *The Tale of Genji*. By this part of the book, the tale’s eponymous protagonist has died, and his son—actually fathered by another man—has become the central character. A more botanically accurate but less-poetic rendering of the tree name in the chapter title would be “Japanese chinquapin (*Castanopsis cuspidata*).”

Page xxvi

Nisen-ichinen Kugatsu Juichinichi Hare—Suiheisen to Suichokusen no Monogatari (1 Ge) (September 11, 2001, Sunny—A Tale of Horizontal Lines and Vertical Lines [1 Lower]); 2002

Sumi ink on paper, 95.0 cm x 60.0 cm

Contents

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

ix

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

xiii

GALLERY: WORKS BY THE AUTHOR

xvii

I. T A C T I O N

The wellspring of calligraphic expression

1

II. R E C I P R O C I T Y

The yin and yang of calligraphy

31

III. V E R T I C A L I T Y

Calligraphy's spiritual orientation

55

IV. MELODY*Regularity, irregularity, and both*

75

V. STORYTELLING*Plot development through taction*

99

VI. RHYTHM*Meterless and stepped taction*

131

VII. COMMUNICATION*The modes of expression*

161

VIII. BRUSH DYNAMICS*Upright and sideways, jabbing and caressing,
pushing and pulling*

181

IX. ARCHITECTURE

How characters come together

201

X. DANCE

Movement seen and motion sensed

225

XI. PROTOSCRIPTS

Calligraphy and design

243

XII. MARGIN

Calligraphy's larger context

261

INDEX

281

I

T A C T I O N

The wellspring of calligraphic expression

CALLIGRAPHY'S TACTILE RECIPROCITY AND SIMULTANEITY

A chief aim in this book is to highlight the reciprocity and simultaneity that are inherent to calligraphy. Those properties differentiate calligraphy from the seemingly similar art form of painting. An oil painter receives input from a subject via visual perception and outputs his or her interpretation of the subject to the canvas. The input and output are sequential, and the application of paint to the medium is unilateral.

In calligraphy, every action that the calligrapher undertakes vis-à-vis the medium—every contact between the brush and the paper—elicits an opposite and equal reaction. The calligrapher is continuously parrying the energy that rebounds from the medium even as he or she continues to pour energy into the medium through the brush. That continuing reciprocity of action and reaction animates the drama that unfolds as a work of calligraphy.

Another kind of reciprocity that has shaped calligraphy decisively is historical: the mutual influence of the chisel and the brush. The evolution of brushwork in China proceeded in parallel with the evolution of carving. Aesthetics born of chisel work exerted a powerful influence on the development of scripts for writing with brushes on paper. Likewise, stone carvers noted the possibilities engendered by the new media, and they emulated those possibilities with their chisels.

An understanding of calligraphy's roots in carving thus remains indispensable in creating works on paper and in appreciating those works. I will describe in detail how ink on paper is an exact analog of three-dimensional carving in stone. We will see, for example, how ink gradations correspond to the gradations of shade that accompany differing depths of carving.

The reciprocity of action and reaction—whether in carving with a chisel or in drawing with a brush—unfolds through the sense of touch. So fundamental is the tactile sense to calligraphy that I eschew, as a rule, the traditional term “brushwork.” (I make an exception to that practice when necessary to distinguish work on paper from work on stone.) That term denotes the act of caressing the surface of a sheet of paper with a brush. Yet that caressing is only one-half of the action in question. The other half consists of the tactile sensations that the calligrapher receives back from the medium. To express the tactile reciprocity that is essential to calligraphy, I use the term “taction.”

We humans, almost alone in the animal kingdom, experience our environment through tools, and the brush is a quintessential tool. Just as the tools of human industry and lifestyles transform our environment, the calligrapher's brush and ink transform their medium. Bringing a brush down onto a virgin sheet of paper is a momentous act. I hope to convey in this book a sense of the profound responsibility that calligraphers undertake through their taction.

ORIENTAL CALLIGRAPHY, OCCIDENTAL CLASSICAL MUSIC

This book examines, in 12 installments, the nature of calligraphy as an art form and the special position that calligraphy occupies in Oriental aesthetics. Our focus will be on something other than the commonplace concerns of skillful or unskillful, pleasing or unpleasing to the eye. We will examine calligraphy as something fundamental to expression and to culture in the nations where people read and write Chinese ideographs. People in Japan know those ideographs as kanji (literally, “Han characters”) and use them in combination with the phonetic syllabaries hiragana and katakana, with Arabic numerals, and with the Latin alphabet.