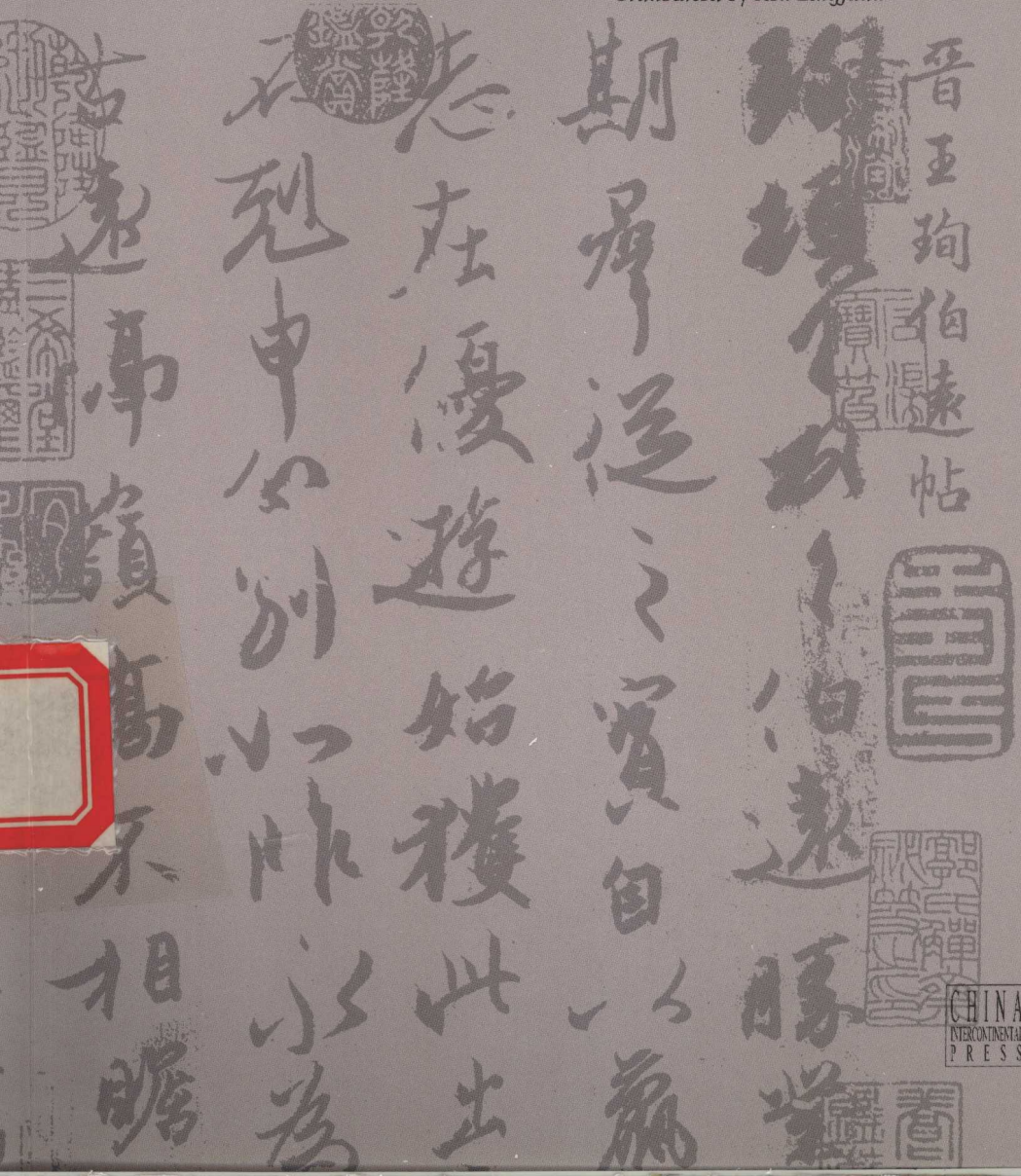


Chen Tingyou

# CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

The Art of Handwriting

Translated by Ren Lingjuan



CHINA  
INTERCONTINENTAL  
PRESS

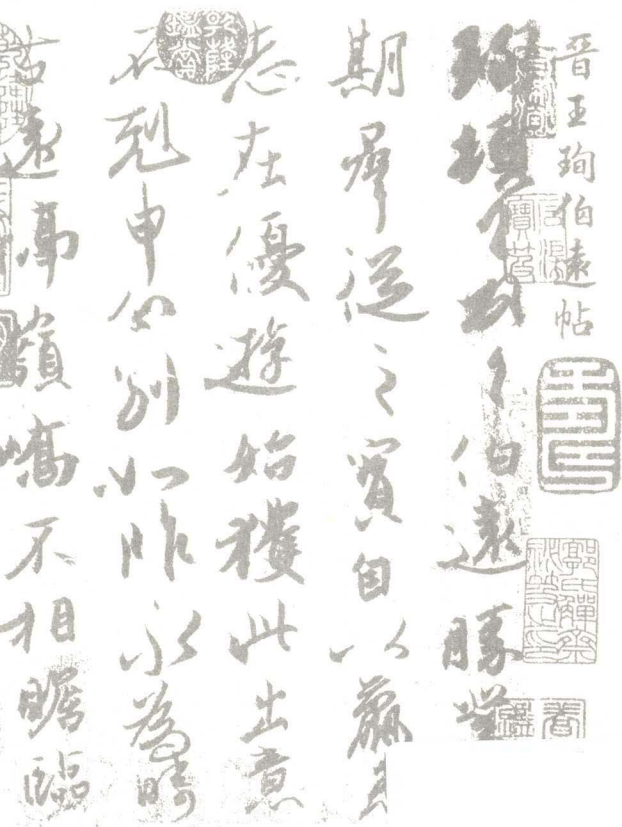
Cultural China Series

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### The Art of Handwriting

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# Foreword

## 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 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 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 demonstrate 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.







A traditional sitting room of a scholar.

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



A runin-style calligraphic work by pan Boying on a fan covering.

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 囍 (meaning double happiness) in calligraphic style; on his birthday, a big character 寿 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 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



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





## CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

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.

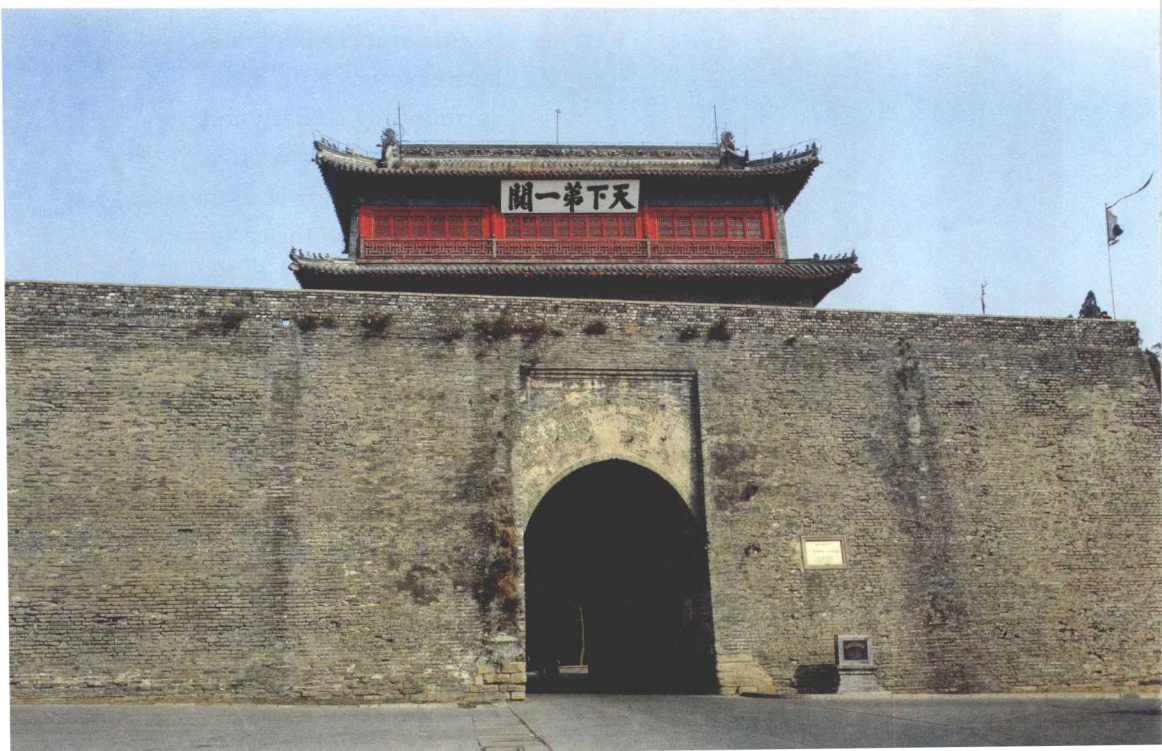
If you visit Mount Taishan in Shandong Province, you can visit the Sutra Stone Valley to the east of Longquan Peak, where, on a flat 60,000-square-meter rock, a calligrapher carved the text of the Buddhist Diamond Sutra in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, each character measuring 35 square centimeters, and the largest one measuring 50 square centimeters. However, only 1,067 of the 3,017 original characters are legible.

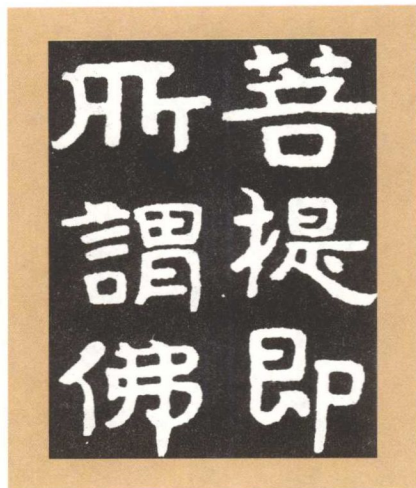
### Cliff stone inscription

Calligraphy or Buddhist figures carved on cliffs or stones, which can be seen all over China. Cliff stone inscription is also known as a special spell for suppressing fengshui.

The gate-tower of the Shanhai Pass and the horizontal plaque inscribed with five huge Chinese characters meaning “the First Pass under Heaven.”

關一第下天





Part of the text of the *Buddhist Diamond Sutra* in the *Sutra Stone Valley*, dating from the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

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 41 other men of letters gathered at the Orchid Pavilion to compose poems while drinking wine. Wang Xizhi (303–361) wrote a 324-character *Preface to 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.”

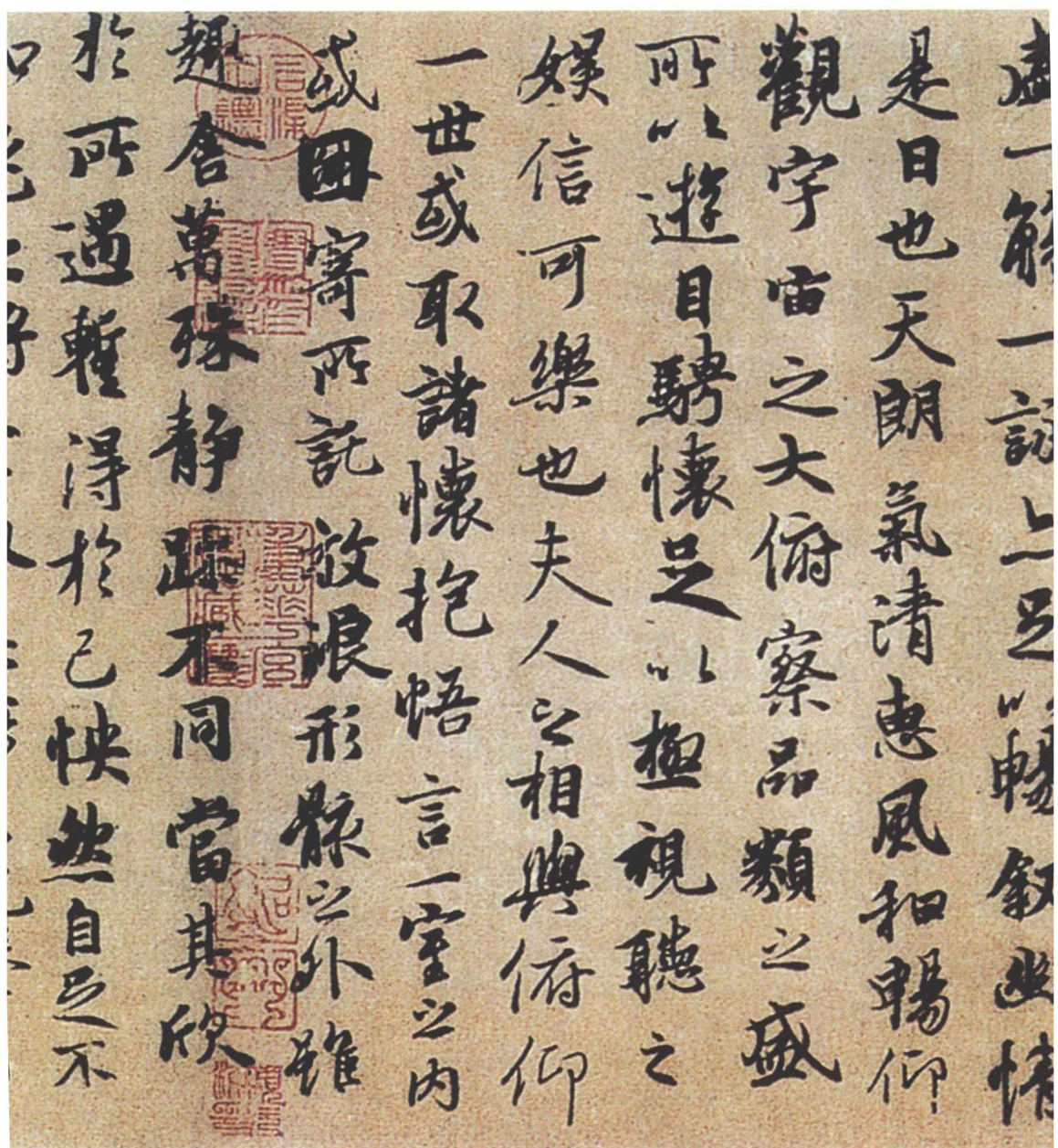
Unfortunately, the original of the preface was buried together with Li Shimin (599–649), the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), who was the fan of Wang Xizhi and also a fine calligrapher. The preface we see today is a copy done by Feng Chengsu of the Tang Dynasty.

The Forest of Steles in the ancient capital city of Xi'an is the oldest and best collection in China and also a treasure room 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 (206 BC–220 AD) and Tang dynasties are displayed in the exhibition halls, galleries and pavilions. Initially built in 1087, the Forest of Steles has now been turned into the Xi'an Beilin Museum and is a cultural site under state protection.

Standards and criteria for assessing calligraphic skills and works are rigorous. The calligraphic skills demonstrate the calligrapher's cultural background, artistic level and sentiments. Through the ages, many of famous calligraphers are also painters,







Part of the Preface to the Collection of Orchid Pavilion Poems, written by Wang Xizhi of the Jin Dynasty.



永和九年歲在癸丑暮春之初會  
 于會稽山陰之蘭亭脩禊事  
 也羣賢畢至少長咸集此地  
 有峻領茂林脩竹又有清流激  
 湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水  
 列坐其次雖無絲竹管弦之





thinkers, politicians or scholars. When talking about a person's achievements in calligraphy, his achievements in other fields are always mentioned. Excellent calligraphic works can demonstrate outstanding ability and great learning of the calligrapher.

Calligraphy is the art that Chinese people first 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.

People call calligraphy "a piece of 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 essential elements of beauty—balance, proportion, variety, continuity, contrast, movement, change and harmony—through different shapes and forms of the lines, their combinations and ways of movement. Calligraphy also inspires other arts, and vice versa.

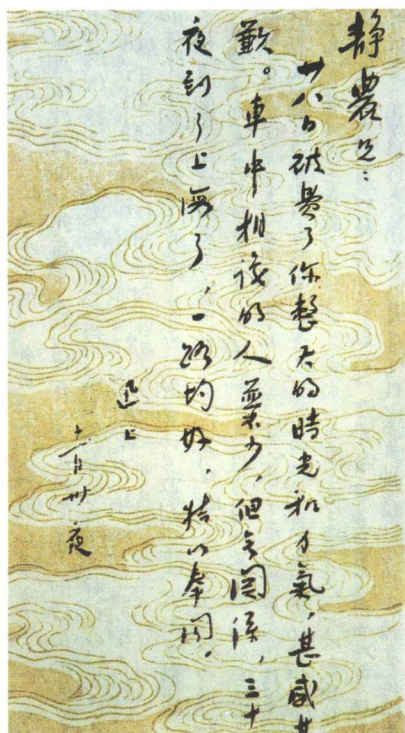
Like music, has rhythm is a major element of calligraphy. The dots and strokes in thick and light ink or in round or square



The last part of the *Preface to the Collection of Orchid Pavilion Poems*, written by Wang Xizhi of the Jin Dynasty.



A picture of Lu Xun (1881–1936).



A running-script letter by Lu Xun.

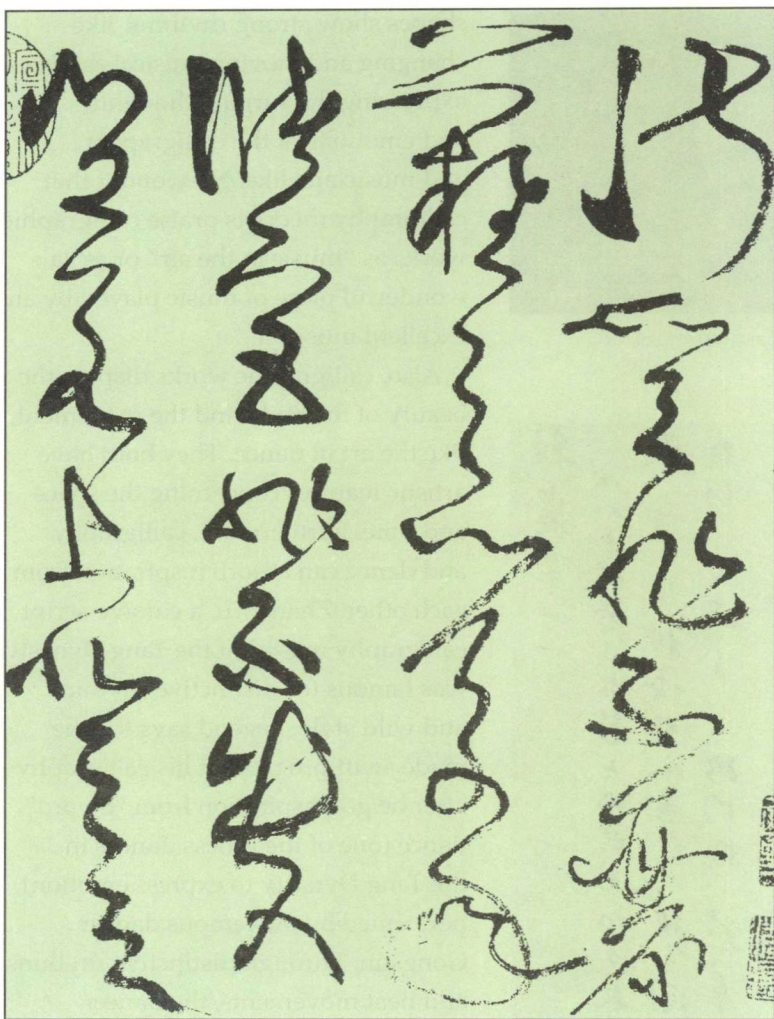
A contemporary writer and also a great calligrapher, Lu Xun developed his own simple but smooth calligraphic style. His calligraphic works are kept by people as treasures.

shapes show strong rhythms, like changing and moving musical rhythms, expressing the surging thoughts and emotions of the calligrapher and musician alike. No wonder that calligraphy theorists praise calligraphic works as “music in the air” or as “a wonderful piece of music played by an excellent musician.”

Also, calligraphic works display the beauty of the body and the movement, like the art of dance. They both have artistic features concerning the space and time. Furthermore, 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 wild style. Legend says that he made swift progress in his calligraphy after he got inspiration from “Sword” dance (one of the fitness dances in the Tang Dynasty to express emotion) performed by the famous dancer Gongsun. Through distinctive rhythms and neat movements, the dancer reveals various charms and emotions such as vividness, joy, sadness, anger, aspiration, demand, boldness and inspiration. The cursive-script calligraphic works made by Zhang Xu, the poems by Li Bai (701–762) and the sword dance by Pei Min were praised







Part of the *Four Models of Calligraphy of Classic Poems*, by Zhang Xu of the Tang Dynasty.

as “three wonders” by the emperor at that time. The *Four Models of Calligraphy of Classical Poems* is one of rare calligraphic works by Zhang Xu handed down by history. The characters used in this work are bold and unrestrained. They link together like one character and the space between the characters varies greatly.



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

In the 1980s, Beijing Television Station made an artistic program entitled "Ink Dance," which introduced the arts of calligraphy and dance at that time. In accordance to a calligraphic work presented, the dancer did the dance movements in line with the meanings and shapes of the characters. Light steps, soft waist movements and gentle music stimulated the audience's imagination.

Calligraphy has a closer relation with traditional Chinese painting. They both use brushes and Xuan paper; the difference is that calligraphy uses black ink only, while painting applies lots of colors. Calligraphy, as an art, exists together with other arts. In bookstores, calligraphic works are sold together with paintings.

At some exhibitions,

calligraphic works are exhibited together with paintings. Usually, a painter will save a space for a calligrapher to write a classical poem or poetic lines related to the scenes and objects appearing on the picture so as to make it more attractive. The picture will be more charming and tasteful if it is accompanied with 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 “three wonderful talents”.

Skills used in calligraphy and painting are exchangeable. Traditional painting gets 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 from the simple but smooth brush strokes of calligraphy. Qi Baishi's paintings of shrimps are good examples. Qi sketches shrimps with a few simple strokes and uses different shades of ink. Without drawing 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, although mathematical theory is abstract, it profoundly reflects the relations between space and mathematics. That's why all schools pay great attention to education of mathematics. Moreover natural scientists rely on steady mathematical knowledge to study profound mysteries and principles of the natural sciences they are engaged in. This reminds me of a celebrated dictum of Lao Zi, a great philosopher who lived 2,500 years ago: “The Way is mysterious and profound, and is the door to various wonders.” Here I apply his dictum to Chinese calligraphy, which is mysterious and profound, and the door to various kinds of arts.

