

CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

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 湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水
 列坐其次雖無絲竹管絃之



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尹 國 瑞



China Intercontinental Press

图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

中国书法：英文 / 陈廷祐著；任灵娟译. —北京：五洲传播出版社，2018.8
（“中华之美”丛书）
ISBN 978-7-5085-4021-4

I. ①中… II. ①陈… ②任… III. ①汉字—书法—中国—英文 IV. ①J292.1

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2018)第191909号

“中华之美”丛书

主 编：陈陆军
出 版 人：荆孝敏

中国书法

著 者：陈廷祐
译 者：任灵娟
责任编辑：苏 谦
封面设计：谢金宝
内文设计：北京本一缘文化传播有限公司
出版发行：五洲传播出版社
地 址：北京市海淀区北三环中路31号生产力大楼B座7层
邮 编：100088
发行电话：010-82005927，82007837
网 址：<http://www.cicc.org.cn> <http://www.thatsbooks.com>
承 印 者：北京利丰雅高长城印刷有限公司
版 次：2018年8月第1版第1次印刷
开 本：650×960mm 1/16
印 张：9.25
定 价：160.00元

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Foreword

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.

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

A traditional sitting room of a scholar.





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

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 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



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

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 6th 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 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, 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.

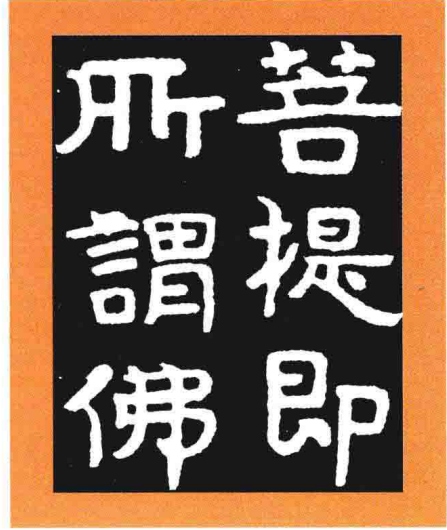
Calligraphy is the art that Chinese people first learn. While teaching children to read characters, parents and teachers not only show them the strokes; they also try to arouse their aesthetic consciousness and develop their artistic judgment and creation. This is helpful for their future.

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

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



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



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 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

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
 一世或取諸懷抱悟言一室之內
 或因寄所託放浪形骸之外雖
 趣舍萬殊靜躁不同當其欣
 於所遇暫得於己快然自足不

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
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 湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水
 列坐其次雖無絲竹管絃之盛一



王羲之



王羲之



王羲之



王羲之



流觴曲水

清流激湍

少長咸集

禊事

暮春之初

會稽山陰

王羲之

王羲之

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 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



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).

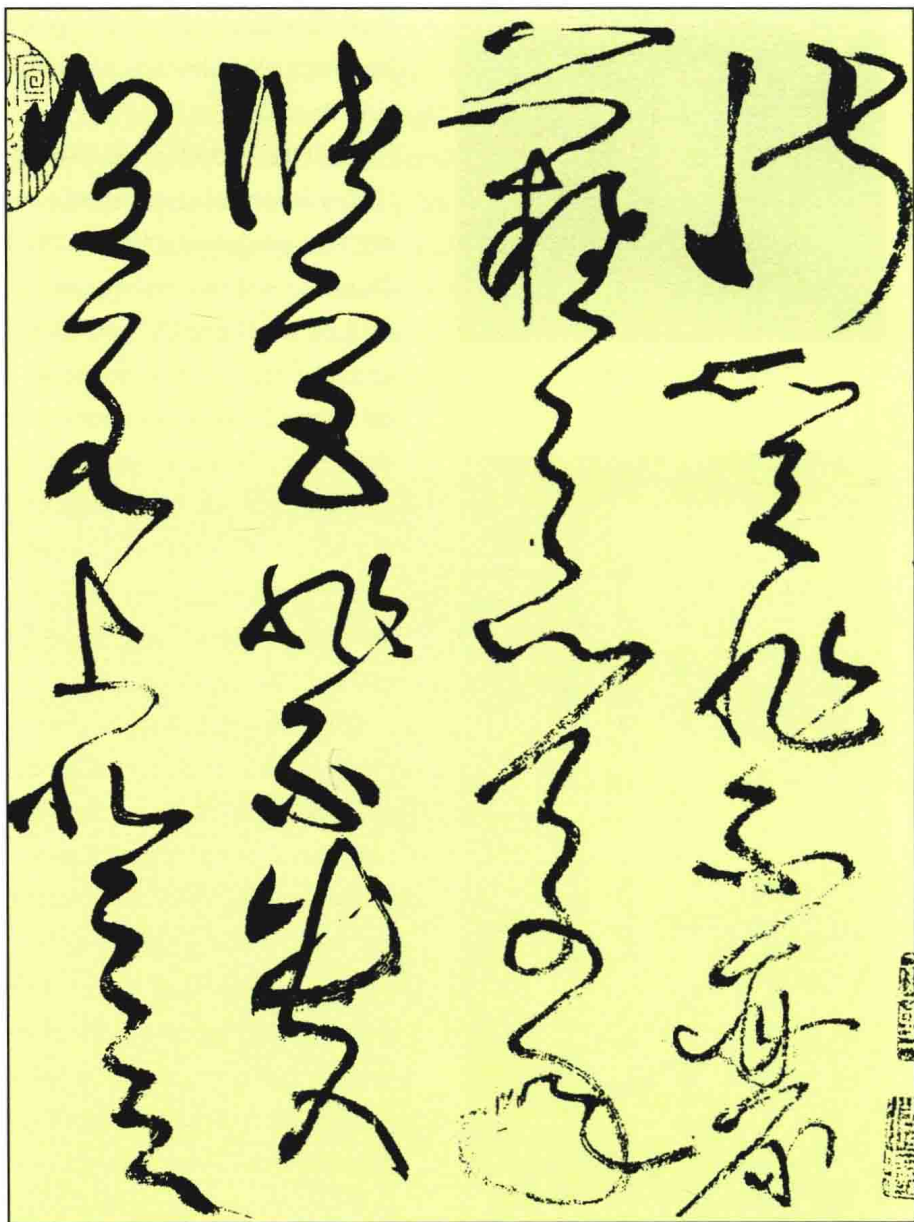


A running-script letter by Lu Xun. A contemporary writer and also a great calligrapher, Lu Xun developed his own simple but smooth calligraphic style. His calligraphic works are kept by people as treasures.

one character and the space between the characters varies greatly.

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



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