
Yang Xing

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Professor Heather Julien

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Chinese Calligraphy, an Art of 4300 Years

"If one is asked to choose one single art form to represent Chinese culture, a culture that has lasted for more than 5000 years, I believe that most people would have chosen Chinese Calligraphy," said Qian Mu, historian and classicist, the founder of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. "Chinese calligraphy isn't an art form unique to China itself. In the past, all the East-Asian countries that has used Chinese characters, including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, valued and learnt and created numerous calligraphy works. Some of these countries even formed their own writing styles and influenced China back," said Jian Bozan, historian, the vice president of Peking University.

Calligraphy has long been considered to be the single most important art form in Chinese culture. (Qian Mu, 1887) However, due to many difficulties (Qiu Zhenzhong, 2009), Western world always finds itself hard to accept and appreciate this kind of unique art form. Throughout my auto-ethnography, I will give you a brief introduction to Chinese calligraphy, including its choice of instrument, and its

various writing styles. I will also discuss some of the recent debates over calligraphy, including the belief that calligraphy will gradually die out.(Zhu, 1996) In addition, I will talk about some of the benefits of calligraphy that people don't usually realize. (Zong, 1981). Finally, I shall conclude by trying to find a way to communicate calligraphy between China and the West. Together with me, we will learn and explore this old but fascinating art form.

If one wants to learn about Chinese Calligraphy, it is better for him or her to understand the development of Chinese Characters first. Chinese Characters begin from jiaguwen, which was used in Shang Dynasty (about 16th to–11th century B.C.). It has a long history of over 3000 years. Generally, we think jiaguwen as the oldest Character system because it is the earliest system we have found that is mature and systematic. In the history, although scripts may change, Chinese Character comes down in a continuous line. The scripts of Chinese Character are mainly made up of jiaguwen, jinwen, xiaozhuan, lishu, caoshu, xingshu and kaishu. Among them, kaishu and xingshu are used often today.

Jiaguwen is the kind of character system that is discovered from the remains of shang Dynasty. Because these characters were carved or written on the tortoise shells and the bones, it was called jiaguwen. (Jia means shell and Gu means bone) It is the oldest system we found. The square turning is the main way of writing (or carving), and smooth turning is rare. Its lines are mostly thin.

Jinwen is the system that was mainly used in Shang Dynasty and Zhou Dynasty, and sometimes in Han Dynasty. It was discovered on the bronze wares, so it was named jinwen (Jin means metal). These verses cast on the ancient zhongs(bells) and dings (the ancient Chinese cooking vessels with two loop handles and three or four legs) were almost always used to record the contributions of the kings and their officials in those times, so this kind of script has another two names, zhongdingwen and mingwen(the script of inscriptions). The writing style of jinwen is the same as jiaguwen, but neater and more well-balanced, and its lines are thicker, too.

When Chinese history came to Qin Dynasty, Qinshihuang united China He launched the first reform of Chinese character. The character used by Qin kingdom was sorted out and simplified and used in the united country, and the other (six) kingdoms' characters were banished. This reformed character was named xiaozhuan or Qinzhuan which was originated from the former characters, but its lines are the neatest and most well-balanced, and the shapes of it are even firmer. It is a very important style, for it is the end of the ancient Chinese characters (jiaguwen, jinwen, xiaozhuan) and the beginning of the modern Chinese characters (lishu, caoshu, xingshu, kaish).

Lishu was developed from xiaozhuan in Qin Dynasty, and it was mainly used in Han Dynasty and Wei Dynasty. Compared with xiaozhuan, the strokes of lishu are

straighter and squarer, and it removes the feature of "being a picture" of Chinese character. Since then, the shades of Chinese characters have almost been stabilized. Of course, there are still many differences in different scripts.

Caoshu is formed from lishu in Han Dynasty, and it grew up in Jin Dynasty. It is the fastest writing style. The original Caoshu was called zhangcao, and its developed type is called jincao (modern caoshu).

Kaishu is also known as Zhengshu Script, and it was evolved from seal characters. It is simpler in structure and square in shape. To be specific, it is more standardized horizontally and vertically. The integral feature of formal script is neatness and orderliness, and for such reason it is widely used and favored today.

Xingshu was also developed from lishu in Han Dynasty, and it was very popular in Wei Dynasty, Jin Dynasty and South-north Dynasty. It is very practical, and people use it widely today.

Although nowadays, with the fast development of material science, we are able to substitute many natural resources with artificial synthetic materials that sometimes perform even better than natural materials, in the field of Chinese calligraphy, unfortunately, people still use fox and goat fur to make the hairs of ink brush. Scientists have done many experiments, and they have come up with many "new

type" ink brushes made with artificial materials, but none of them could compete with the capacity of ink brushes made with animal fur.

Most scholars and experts believe that the use of ink brush is the most outstanding characteristic of Chinese calligraphy. Although in most cultures, people have developed calligraphy as a technique, but they are largely different from Chinese calligraphy in that they only use pens, and when you write in a pen, you produce a work that is composed of simple lines connected together. However, when you write in ink brushes, you are able to move the brush up and down, and thus control the depth, the thickness and the lightness of the ink. In other words, you can produce a 3 dimensional artwork that include the elements of drawing instead of just manipulating the positions of lines.

In both of my interviews, Xiaoming and Professor Li expressed their concerns about the future of Chinese calligraphy. While Xiaoming talks about this topic based on his individual experiences, Professor Li approaches it in a more academic point of view. To me, some of her points are really worth noticing. For example, Li states that since we don't use ink brush as an everyday tool anymore, it is simply impossible for calligraphy to gain the position it once had, and because at now no one could devote decades of time and energy into practicing calligraphy, it is also very unlikely for us to have a great calligrapher that can surpass past calligraphers in a certain field. I remember Chinese philosopher Ma Yifu once said, "In a certain field of art, if no one

can ever exceed his or her predecessors, then their won't be any innovation anymore, and it is the time for this art form to die out." Probably calligraphy won't die out, but it will always remain a minority in the family of art.

As for the topic of globalization, despite its Xiaoming, Professor Li, or other scholars, nearly everyone believes that it is extremely hard to find a "global value" for calligraphy. According to them, the main difficulty is we cannot find an analogy of calligraphy in the West. Also, the appreciation of calligraphy requires certain "subconscious cultural assumption", and it is hard for Westerners to learn it. However, personally I am not as pessimistic as them. If you look at the top of this page, you will find a calligraphy work. This work is done by one of the greatest Caoshu script writer Zhang Xu. Caoshu is a highly abstract and conceptual, and often even experienced calligraphers find themselves hard to interpret Caoshu works. However, the interesting thing is when Western artist Pablo Picasso looked at this work, he highly praised it and called it "the highest mount of Chinese ancient art". I think the reason that he likes it so much is because he could find the same ideas and techniques of expression that he has used in his own work. The field of calligraphy is large, even if there are many content that are unique to Chinese cultural itself, there may still be much left for us to share universally. After all, good art is universal.

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