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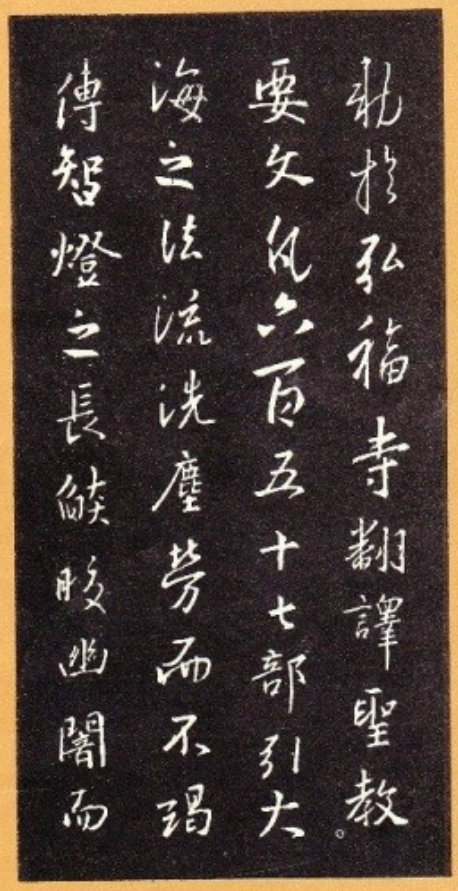
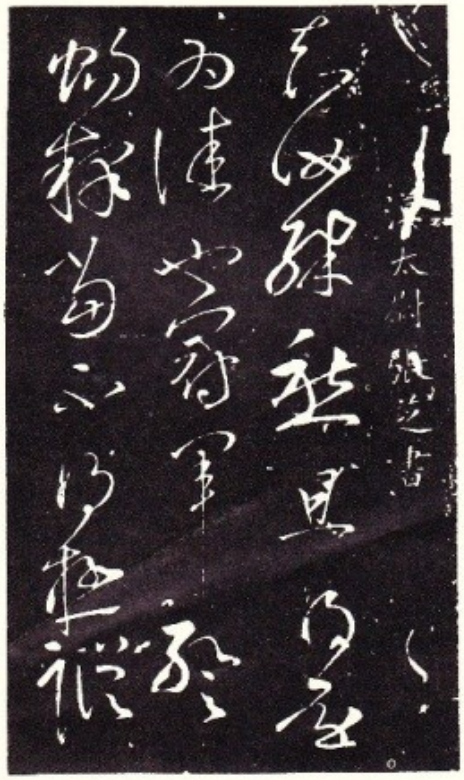
By Dr. George K. C. Yeh

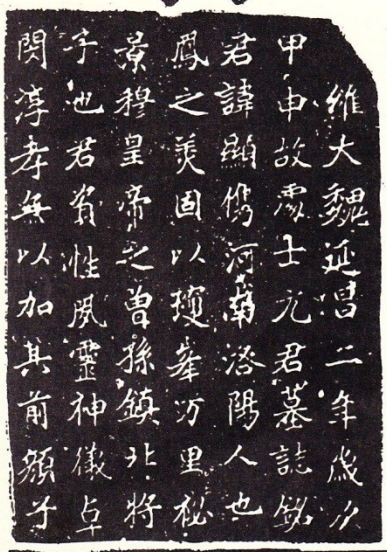


Li Shu

Tso Shu or the grass style

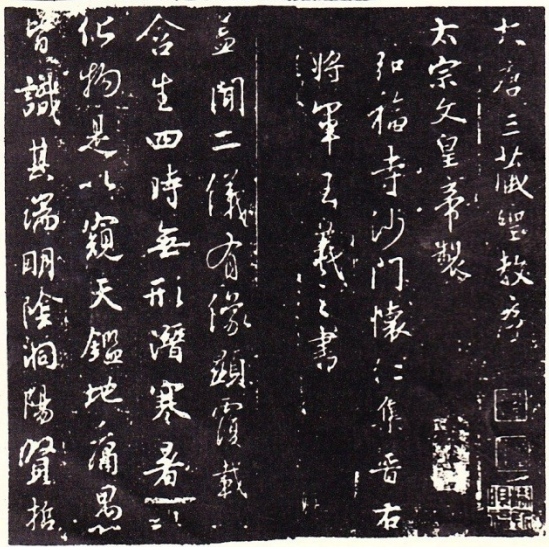


Chia Ku Won or bone inscriptions



← *Kai Shu* or the regular style

↓ *Hsing Shu* or the running style



Chinese Calligraphy

By Dr. George K. C. Yeh

Text of a speech on "Things Chinese" delivered at the Women's Association for the Study of Asian Problems, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China, on August 12, 1963.

Of China's many creative arts, calligraphy is probably the least understood and appreciated. The reasons are not far to seek. In the first place, Chinese calligraphy is by its nature difficult for Westerners because to understand or appreciate it does require some knowledge of written Chinese. I do not fully subscribe to the rather ethereal idea of a certain classical school in Chinese calligraphy that one can easily appreciate calligraphic art without recognizing the characters. Another reason is that very few Westerners, I think, would care to take the trouble to try it out with a brush, at least once. In these days it's bad enough to have to write with the nib of a pen, a practise which has almost been replaced by the ubiquitous ball or fountain pen, it would seem too much to expect a European to practice calligraphy with a brush every day and doing so for the rest of his

life. Certainly, one *can* learn to appreciate calligraphy without being able to do it, if only one knows something about Chinese characters.

There are known, certain misconceptions of Chinese calligraphy which have only helped to make it seem more mysterious and more difficult to understand.

One is that all Chinese characters are like pictures; that they are either pictographs or pictograms. I prefer calling them pictograms because the combining form *gram* does suggest something written or drawn. Most Americans or Europeans, if they were asked what a Chinese character is like would probably say that it is like a picture, representing a cow, or a pig, or a man, or a woman, as the case may be. That simply is not so. Most Chinese characters have long grown out of the picture stage. They are now composed of a radical, which can be called the semantic element in the character, and a phonetic indicator. Perhaps, over 80% of the existing Chinese characters are of this type of composition. Of course, if you look at some bone or shell inscriptions dating back to the second millennium, you do get a fairly large number of pictorial compositions or simple designs representing the likenesses of the objects. But, roughly since the 4th or 5th century B.C. Chinese characters have become complex structures representing not only simple ideas, but also concepts or the associations of ideas. To think that a calligrapher's art lies in drawing a picture instantaneously to look like an object is a very picturesque idea, but a hopeless mistake.

Chia Ku Wen or bone inscriptions are now known to be the oldest existing calligraphy. Most *chia ku* characters were carved, some were written, on bones or on tortoise

shells,possibly with a pointed stylus. Some, as I said, were obviously written with a brush. Most of the characters written were in black, though some have been found in vermilion. Here are two successive versions of the character of moon found in the bone inscriptions. You will see that there is already an element of conscious design in the later version of the character for moon. This character illustrates the phonetic-semantic compound with the phonetic element on top and the semantic at bottom, or a reverse of the composition.

It is important to remember that all characters have their dictionary meanings so must conform to a set printed or written form. They are written just as English words are spelled in a certain definite way. Its art lies in manipulating the strokes within the character and achieving a pattern, a rhythm, and something which enhances its artistic appeal.

Another misconception about Chinese calligraphy is that you have a situation in which you practically have to remember every stroke of a character, and as no two strokes are alike, as has been suggested by some western writers on the subject, you are required to have tremendous memory. So much so, that Mr. William Willetts in his very scholarly account of Chinese art in the Pelican series. (I must say that no better short account of Chinese art is found in Chinese by Chinese writers), also seemed to suggest that every Chinese calligrapher somehow has to remember all the strokes in the character. In explaining how such memory operates, Mr. Willetts and some other psychologists have asked "whether Chinese calligraphers & painters in general do not operate from a kind of hallucinative memory image in contradistinction to true memory image, or the primary memory image which is apprehended imme-

dately after experiencing a percept, as when a (Western) painter transfers his regard from a studio model to the surface of a sheet of canvas." The hallucinative memory image is secondary in character, or "an awareness apprehended long after the original act of perception." After some considerable discussion it is inferred that Chinese calligraphers and painters may even operate from a sort of eidetic image — an ability to see the absent image which is highly developed only among Western children. This rather profound explanation to trace the origin of a Chinese calligrapher's aesthetic reaction can only serve to frighten away any Westerner in his attempt to understand Chinese calligraphy.

The important fact which contradicts this analysis is that Chinese characters are composite. For instance, take the character for swimming 泳. It is composed of the radical "water" and the phonetic element (水), which appears frequently also in many other characters. So long as you remember the radical for water and the phonetic element you will know how to reconstruct it. So you don't have to remember each stroke in the character. It is therefore not a case of secondary or eidetic memory. It is an ordinary case of immediate intention just as simply as you learn the word cat for the name of the object without having to reform the image of a cat.

Now, another rather obstructing generalization about Chinese language is that you have many thousands of characters, which is true, and all these characters bear no relations with one another. So when a calligrapher comes to perform, he would have some difficulty in choosing what kind of style he must write in, and the poor reader, the man who looks upon the character, must also be so gifted or educated

to the extent of recognizing all the different styles in one page of Chinese calligraphy. That is brought out very clearly in almost two chapters by a German art expert, for whom I also have very great admiration. This German scholar concludes that it would be next to impossible for a European to become a Chinese calligrapher, or to appreciate Chinese calligraphic art.

The plain truth is that there is one printed script in China today, as I have already said. In fact, it has been in existence for nearly 2,000 years. That printed script is almost like the *Kai shu,* or the regular style. From *kai shu,* in which the strokes are not joined together, as your children first learn to do the letters of the alphabet one by one, you naturally tend to do it more quickly, that is, whenever conveniently possible, you join the strokes together. This is called *hsing shu,* the cursive or running style. There is also a very rapid style, called *tsao shu,* or the grass style, which is also much practised and highly developed as an art form. This grass style did not derive, however, from the printed form, and has no direct relationship with the *kai shu* or the *hsing shu.* It must have been develop and existed, almost as early as *li shu,* in the first or second century B.C. The grass style is the one style which corresponds to your shorthand.

In general, one can say that, the *kai shu,* the *hsing shu* and the *tsao shu,* are the three styles of calligraphy mostly used in China. The *tsao shu* or the grass style is mostly practiced by men of letters, but every literate Chinese can at least read and write in the *kai shu* and *hsing shu.* This is saying no more than that every American can do the printed script and the cursive style in English.

From the point of view of design and artistic appeal, the great dividing line in the development of Chinese calligraphy is the *li shu*.

Li shu is written much like the present day *kai shu*, but one of the strokes, usually the level horizontal one, in the character would have a slight downward pause followed by an upward finish. This *li shu* style was the common every day writing script for almost 500 years. It was the dividing line in the sense that practically all the styles before *li shu* were composed of strokes which had no modulation in the thickness of the strokes, or no variation in the width of the stroke. In other words, *li shu* was the first style which offers modulation in the thickness of the stroke as an additional feature in calligraphy.

Now I must start right away with what I think to be the basic strokes which compose Chinese characters. I do not mean that all Chinese characters have these strokes, but Chinese characters each and all have one or two or several of these strokes.

1. The first type of stroke, which is very common and which you have in all European scripts, is the horizontal line from left to right, which we call a *heng*. (All Chinese characters move from top downward and right to left).

Classical calligraphers used to lay very great stress on the training of this one line, which is compared to a trailing cloud sailing slowly and majestically from a thousand *li* and suddenly comes to a stop. The reason why it is compared to a trailing cloud is because the important thing with the writing of this stroke

is that your hand has to be very, very steady in doing it. For this reason, in many books on Chinese calligraphy the ability to do well this horizontal line with a brush is regarded as elemental.

2. The vertical line, or *chih*. It is described as a vine stem centuries old but still stout with strength.

3. Then, there is the dot, or *tien*, giving the impression of a rock falling with all its force from a high cliff. The dot can begin with the tip of the brush facing any direction and end with as much variety of a lift.

4. A *pieh*, a stroke moving from right leftward and gradually narrowing down to a pointed finish like the slash of a sword, or "the gleaming horn of a rhinoceros."

5. You now have a sharp curve, 折 or like the "sinews and joints of a strong crossbow, pliable in appearance but in reality very firm."

6. A *na* a downward stroke veering from left to right — the opposite of *pieh* — like a wave suddenly rolling up, or a flying cloud emitting growls of thunder.

7. A *ti*, also a downward stroke moving from left to right, but straighter and stiffer than the *na* and made to appear like a dropping pine-tree with firm roots.

With these basic strokes you do your characters. But, as I said at the beginning, it is important to remember that characters have meanings. You remember what Walter Pater said in his famous essay *Renaissance*, that all art approaches the state of music. It is only in music that the form and substance become merged in one. You do not discuss what a note means. A note is a note. It is form and content, all in one. Other arts have not such ideal merging of form and substance.

Chinese calligraphy can not claim that it has the same measure of union, but it does have the advantage of implicit meaning. There cannot be much doubt or discussion

about a written character from the way it is written. A character in whichever style it is written has a formal meaning, though sometimes it says more of less than what it means, as Humpty Dumpty put it. An able grass calligrapher, for instance, would never leave much room for doubt as to which of the *kai shu* characters he is doing. So there is no problem of communication, as there often is in much modern poetry and art. In otherwards, the calligrapher, when he is one, is never tortured by how to put it in order to get it across.

Most Chinese characters seem to conform more or less to a square pattern. If you draw a circle, a triangle and a square, and a rectangle and fill each of the four forms with a variety of the seven types of strokes I described above, you'd find that the square is the one which can contain the greatest number of various strokes.

Next to the square, which contains most characters, you have the rectangle, or some oblong shape. Very few recognized calligraphers in the past have been able to base their writings on forms other than the square. The circle is occasionally used to give relief to a succession of characters with square outlines, such as 田, 國. Most calligraphers unconsciously fall into some general pattern a little longer or flatter than the square. This is sometimes explained by certain physical traits of the calligrapher, or the hidden desire to compensate for them.

Within the character, there is always a centre of gravity, which rests on certain types of balanced props or foundations. If it is found to stand on one point there is usually a sort of second floor or a pair of wings above the point, as in the case of 中. When there are more than one point the points are usual-

ly more or less balanced on a level. When you have a character with the strokes out of balance, I don't care what nationality you are, you will feel it because it upsets your physical balance, if not your stomach. When a child is taught calligraphy in China and makes a character out of balance, his teacher would say, "I can blow this character to pieces as I blow out a flickering candle."

When I was a child, children were taught to do their characters within a square in red outlines divided into 9 equal squares. Certain strokes of a character must pass through certain squares in order to achieve a structural compactness defying external pressure from all directions. Not only the different strokes but the intervening spaces are also described as solid or flimsy as the case may be. This principle of basic strength, already recognized in the Han Dynasty, became common school teaching in the Tang Dynasty.

I have already referred to the semantic-phonetic composition of most Chinese characters. Now, over 60% of the characters embracing these two elements are divisible into 2 parts, an upper and lower part, or a left and right part. Each element being a partner in a character accepts certain responsibilities. The strokes of each element or part in a character are made to "look after or echo" those of the other part, thus achieving an inner compactness or "defense" within the character. Thus, it is much easier to attain structural compactness when the character has a number of strokes to deal with. But when you have a character with only one or two strokes, that to Chinese calligraphers, is the most difficult problem to handle. For instance, *yi*, or the character for one (一), is a very difficult character to face because it has no composi-

tion by itself and other parts to help it to balance. It must rely on the character above or the character below to stand up well on its feet. Or, take the character for three, *san* (三), composed of three parallel horizontal lines, it is a little better than *yi* but it also has no supporting components. So the normal practise is to make the last line the longest of the three and vary the length of the second and the first line slightly in accordance with your personal style. There is also the problem of the relative distances between the three strokes.

I've just given some points to illustrate the importance of structure compactness. The strokes illustrated were with a pliable hair brush. This kind of writing brush has been in continuous use in China since at the latest the 5th Century B.C. as evidenced in the archeological findings in the Chu tombs in Hunan. It is made in such a way as to permit the widest variety of strokes in the hand of a trained calligrapher. There are three sources of pressure from the human hand on the brush: the finger, the wrist and the elbow, depending upon the size and style of calligraphy. From very ancient times, the Chinese discovered that if you wanted to achieve the maximum degree of freedom with the brush you must hold your brush straight and as far away from your wrist as you can. In other words, your finger tips must be as far away from the middle of your palm as is possible without, however, hampering the local movements of your finger-joints needed for doing smaller characters. This is more easily said than done, but it is a simple case of muscular co-ordination which must be acquired at an early stage.

When the Chinese speak of *pi fa*, or rules of brush-work, they refer to the ability

of the calligrapher to handle his strokes, in addition to structural compactness. These are the two classical primary criteria for judging calligraphy. But the highest quality in calligraphy is often summarized in the term "rhythmic vitality." This is best seen in a good piece of grass character, or *tsao shu*. Here the characters can be joined together by continuing the last stroke of a character with the beginning stroke of the next one. It is in this style that some of the greatest calligraphers have distinguished them. You will see that not only are the 4 characters joined together, the stroke in the characters are also joined together with the result that the whole thing becomes one continuous linear movement.

What you have here in the joining together of the four characters is a pattern of intersecting lines and interlocked spaces. The boldness and rapidity with which the strokes are performed and joined together gives you strength and vitality in a rhythmic pattern of moving lines.

The grass style has been compared to various kinds of human movements. One rather picturesque analogy is that of an old-time water carrier carrying two large buckets of water, each hanging by a rope from one end of a bamboo pole on his shoulder, through a narrow busy street crowded with people and stalls. As he will be paid at the end of his labor by the amount of water he delivers to his customer, he must let no water spill over. So, he threads along, avoiding obstacles quickly by sudden stops and turns followed by frantic dashes into spaces which may close in on him in the nick of a second. He shouts, bends, twists, rushes and veers to a stop without spilling a drop of his precious water. The intricate pattern of movements and stops is

that of a piece of grass calligraphy.

Another comparison is a hen party where you have one rather quiet hostess, presumably a dowager type, receiving her lady guests one by one and speaking a few words to each in delicate tones. As more and more guests arrive, some no doubt quite garrulous, the room echoes with laughter, giggles and outbursts of exclamatory shrills. Then, the clouds in the sky darken; a sudden thunder storm breaks out drowning all the voices in the parlour. The hostess remains in her silken affability while her guests begin to depart, one by one. That a piece of calligraphy should have suggested a social gathering of this kind must seem strange to some people. It is the interplay of strokes and the tempo of rhythms as suggested by line movements which give rise to this analogy.

My time is running out. I must come to a stop somehow. Let me try to define Chinese calligraphy as simply as I can. It is an art form derived from Chinese penmanship in which a variety of strokes gives rise to the rhythmic play of line and spaces in an architonic mileau of monochromes. I would not, however let my artistic instinct usurp the basic fact that calligraphy is fundamentally a means of communication. It is that, but it is much more.

Like all arts, calligraphy is subtly personal. You can always tell a man's character and temperament by his calligraphy, particularly the grass style in which there is more display of individualism than is found in the other styles.