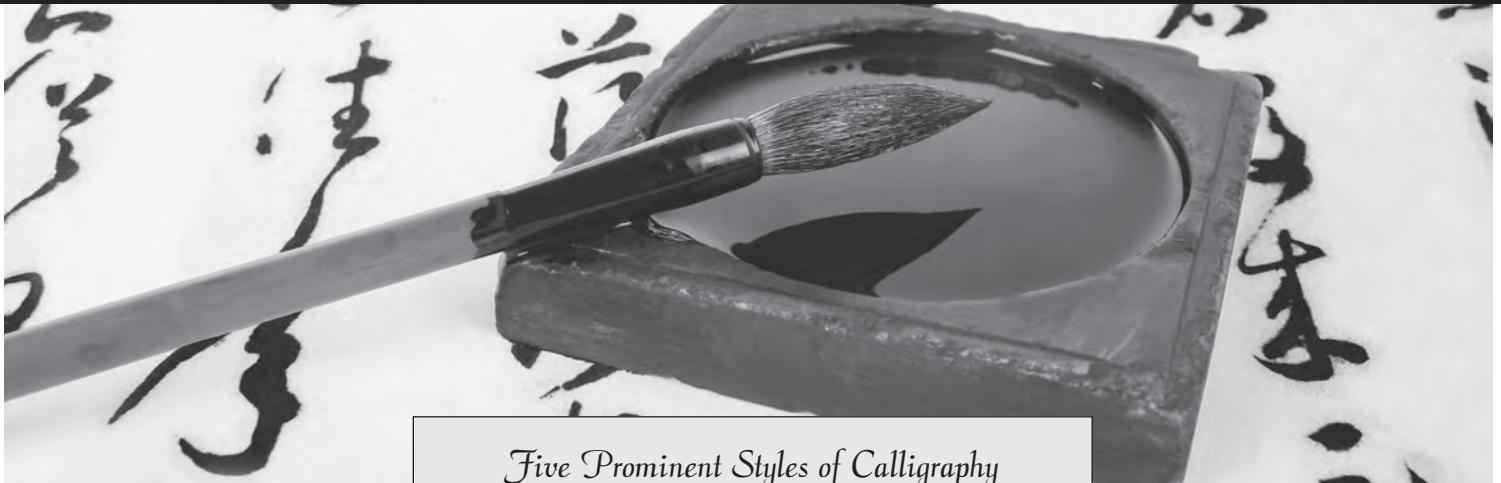


Calligraphy in East Asia

Art, Communication, and Symbology

By Cheryl Crowley and Yu Li



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Five Prominent Styles of Calligraphy



Seal Style

Seal style was originally written with tools other than the brush. The oldest examples of seal script are metal engravings dated to the Spring and Autumn Period (771–403 BCE). In the modern context, this style is most frequently seen in engraved seals used as signature stamps.



Clerical Style

Clerical style, already established by the Qin and Han Periods (221 BCE–220 CE), was written with a brush, often on the wood and bamboo strips linked into scrolls that were an early form of the book in China. Because of its clarity and legibility, it lends itself well to signs, titles, and other kinds of graphic art.



Standard Style

Early forms of standard style date from around the third century CE, but the great “masters” of the form, such as Ouyang Xun (557–641), Yan Zhenqing (709–785), and Liu Gongquan (778–865), lived during the Tang Period (618–907). Square and regular, standard style is the form children learn to read and write in primary school; it is the basis for typefaces typically used in books and other print publications.



Running Style

The running style evolved from early forms of standard script; it condenses the strokes of characters for ease and speed of writing. As it allows for great expressiveness, it was a favorite of scholars and artists in the pre-modern period; it is used in modern settings to convey a sense of freedom and sophistication.



Cursive (Grass) Style

The most flamboyant and yet recondite of all the scripts, the cursive style developed in the Qin and Han Periods, and some of its greatest early examples were written by Wang Xizhi (303–361 CE). Making full use of the potential of the soft brush and fluid ink, cursive style characters go to extremes of simplification, drama, and individuality. Because inscriptions in this style are frequently very difficult to read, it is used in instances where the emphasis is on the abstract form of the character rather than its meaning.

East Asian brush calligraphy closely integrates aspects of art, communication, and symbology, thus offering educators a particularly rich set of resources from which to draw upon. In this article, we start with an overview of brush calligraphy, including its relationship with art, communication, and symbology. We follow with a brief discussion of the historical and contemporary place of brush calligraphy in East Asian education and society; finally, we explore some pragmatic aspects of creating class sessions or even a course on brush calligraphy.

As an artistic genre, brush calligraphy holds a central place in the cultural history in East Asia. The form of the characters used in the Chinese writing system—as well as the other writing systems that were derived from it—have long held a place of special regard in the aesthetic traditions of the region. Brush calligraphy has historically been ubiquitous in the visual culture of China, Japan, and Korea, either as a complement to another kind of image (perhaps a landscape painting or part of an illustrated book) or as a work of art in its own right; consequently, it is central to the study of East Asian art history.

Communication is, of course, the primary purpose of any script. The Chinese writing system developed over millennia and comprises hundreds of thousands of distinct characters. It

has also served as a source for other writing systems, like those of Korea and Japan. While in terms of formal style and usage it has developed greatly over time, the consistencies that it does preserve offer a bridge to East Asian cultures of great antiquity, as well as immediate modernity. The process of learning to read and write Chinese characters (and the texts that employ them) has transformed greatly over centuries, but the tools and techniques of brush calligraphy have remained fundamentally the same since they were introduced in early Imperial China.

Like those of other writing systems, the communicative function of Chinese script is influenced by its graphical aspects, most prominently perhaps in the messages conveyed by its style (*shuti*). The Chinese writing system developed a variety of styles in response to centuries of political, social, and technological change. These styles are typically broken down into five classifications—seal style (*zhuanhu*), clerical style (*lishu*), standard style (*kaishu*), running style (*xingshu*), and cursive (grass) style (*caoshu*)—and are themselves rich in communicative implications. That is, as each style developed under a particular set of historical and cultural conditions, their forms alone have acquired connotations. For example, the graceful elegance of clerical style seems particularly well-suited

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to texts intended to convey social prestige; the remote austerity of grass style matches the content of a poem on the topic of deep spiritual insight.

Finally, in terms of symbology, exploration of East Asian brush calligraphy presents a wide array of discussion points related to the ways that human beings use signs to create meaning. In-depth knowledge of East Asian writing systems requires expertise in fields as varied as linguistics, religion, anthropology, philosophy, art, semiotics, history, and archeology. However, the basics of East Asian brush calligraphy can be learned in a few hours, and the essentials of the social and cultural contexts of its symbology can be introduced in a few class sessions.

Brush Calligraphy, Education, and East Asian Society

Brush calligraphy has been a part of the education system in East Asia for nearly 2,000 years. It was a subject in the examinations taken by aspiring public servants in China from the third century CE, Korea from the eighth century CE, and Việt Nam from the eleventh century CE; it is still a component of primary education programs in schools and private households in Japan, Korea, and throughout the Chinese-speaking diaspora. These examinations were used to measure students' qualifications for positions in government offices. Examiners not only evaluated students on their knowledge of the Confucian classics and their ability to compose poetry and essays, but the ability to write elegantly shaped characters with the brush was a central part of the exams.

The examinations' emphasis on calligraphy was more than a matter of ensuring that students' handwriting was up to the task of drafting legible bureaucratic documents. It was related to the theory that the practice of calligraphy was a form of moral training. Educated people in premodern East Asia commonly believed that because the process of learning to write well required years of repetitive, disciplined practice, it inevitably conveyed practitioners' sincerity, equanimity, strength of character, and perseverance. Those qualities were assumed to be visible in the handwriting of those who had achieved this high level of personal cultivation. Training in writing was the same thing as training in virtue; thus, for those who wished to achieve social and political influence, it was of great importance that one was able to write texts not only persuasive in content but also elegant in appearance.

Brush calligraphy has also played a major role in contexts related to spiritual cultivation. Calligraphy has been a central part of East Asian Buddhist practice for centuries. Copying the text of scriptures such as the *Heart Sutra* (*Prajnaparamitahrdaya* in Sanskrit), has long been a common practice of Japanese Buddhists in order to attain spiritual merit. Followers of the Meditation Sect—best known in English by its Japanese name *Zen*—have historically used calligraphy and ink painting as religious disciplines.

The Imperial examination system was largely abolished by the beginning of the twentieth century, and occasions for brush writing in religious contexts are rare in the present day. Furthermore, digital communication continues to supplant handwritten documents in modern East Asia, as it does in other parts of the developed world. Nonetheless, calligraphy has remained a vital if small part of the curriculum in the Chinese cultural sphere, and there are many reasons for this. Part of calligraphy's appeal is that it allows contemporary people to connect with an ancient practice, but there is also a lingering belief that it is useful in developing a disciplined

virtuous personal character. As anthropologist Yuehping Yen writes of her fieldwork on calligraphy in modern China:

The Chinese people believe that the person and the handwriting are mutually generative:

Handwriting -> ren ru qi zi: The person resembles one's handwriting.

Handwriting -> zi ru qi ren: The handwriting resembles one's person.¹

In Japan, job applicants frequently submit handwritten résumés to prospective employers as one way to demonstrate suitable qualifications. As the use of online application services becomes more common, this practice is starting to decline, especially for fields such as information technology, where computer usage is heavy. However, many Japanese people continue to believe that a handwritten résumé offers insight into the writer's personality and shows the applicant's sense of seriousness about the desired job. An online poll taken by Yahoo Japan as recently as 2015 asked the question, "If you were in charge of hiring, which applicant would you choose: the one who sent a handwritten résumé or the one who typed it on a computer?" Out of 141,635 votes, 72.2 percent (102,274) favored the handwritten résumé.² The results of this poll are particularly interesting, as its respondents presumably were frequent users of online technology themselves.

Furthermore, in mainland China and Taiwan, a growing number of universities and art schools have instituted advanced degree programs in calligraphy and calligraphy education. Students graduate with portfolios that include both written theses and original works of art. These programs reflect a rising demand in schools for teachers at the primary and secondary levels with expertise in calligraphy.³ In short, interest remains strong in brush calligraphy as a focus of historical, anthropological, or archaeological research; but calligraphy practice continues to be vital in the art and education of East Asia.

Brush Calligraphy in the Classroom

Brush calligraphy also has great potential in classrooms outside of East Asia. It has obvious benefits for learners of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language; however, one of the most striking features of the Chinese writing system is its power to fascinate both those who can read it and those who cannot. In this sense, brush calligraphy may be easily integrated into classes covering a range of topics.

The benefit of brush calligraphy in language classes may seem the most obvious. Because beginners typically concentrate on learning to write only a few characters at a time, its utility in helping students memorize large amounts of vocabulary may be small. However, for many learners, practice with a brush helps develop intuition about stroke order and composition, and promote accurate and elegant handwriting. It may also add enjoyment to what some students may find a tedious process of practicing writing Chinese characters.

The potential for including brush calligraphy in nonlanguage classes is also great. For nonlanguage learners, Chinese characters have great fascination. They are visually appealing, and many of our students find them intriguing and mysterious. Such students are in good company: historically, it was not uncommon for people in the sinosphere to even believe that Chinese characters had healing or other magical properties. Even in a modern classroom, their obvious aesthetic attributes of grace and intricacy have a powerfully attractive quality for many students, particularly visual learners.

The Calligraphy Classroom: Tools and Techniques

Historically, calligraphy's basic tool kit included items that came to be called the "Four Treasures of a Scholar's Studio": brush, ink, paper, and ink stone. Typical Chinese calligraphy paper is called *xuanzhi*, which is often erroneously translated as "rice paper" but is more likely to contain fibers of mulberry, elm, or bamboo rather than rice. The invention of liquid bottled ink has enabled students to do without the labor-intensive (if elegant) stick ink, making it possible to use a shallow dish in place of an ink stone. In some cases, ink and paper can be discarded in favor of specially treated paper that temporarily darkens in contact with a brush dipped in water, then

lightens again when dry. This enables the student to reuse the same sheet over and over again without buying new materials; furthermore, it eliminates the need for ink, which reduces costs and the potential for mess. Perhaps modern practitioners of brush calligraphy only require one “Treasure,” the brush itself. Nevertheless, the many varieties of inks, papers, and brushes create different effects, and educators wishing to offer students more than just a brief experience of calligraphy encourage their students to experiment widely.

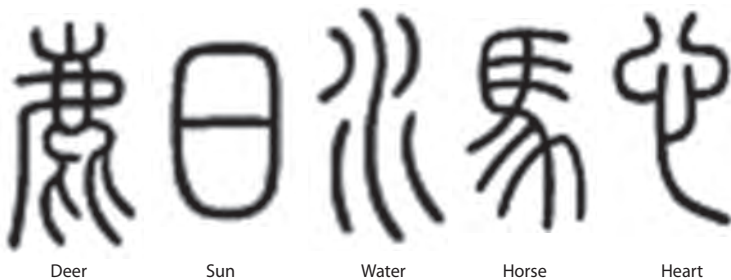
Standard script is the style that most commonly serves as the focus of calligraphy education programs in China, Japan, and Korea. The advantages of following this convention for educators in schools elsewhere are many: It is the one most familiar to learners of Chinese language, and the one that most closely resembles most fonts used in books and other printed documents. For this reason, the shapes and stroke counts of characters written in this style are easy to recognize. Furthermore, in keeping with its status as the most frequently used script, exemplars produced in this style are readily available.

The most frequently mentioned character used as a primary focus of learning standard-style calligraphy is *yong* 永, because its strokes correspond to the “eight strokes” regarded as the basic elements of the standard style: dot, horizontal, vertical, hook, raise, bent, down-left slant, and down-right slant. Textbooks typically choose the work of one of the “great” calligraphers, such as Ouyang Xun (557–641), Yan Zhengqing (709–785), or Liu Gongquan (778–865), as a basis for their models. However, standard is not the only style, and there is strong pedagogical justification for using other styles, or at least starting with them when introducing beginning students to brush calligraphy.

Seal script is a style option particularly well-suited to working with learners with no experience with Chinese characters, or with young children. This form is derived from characters used in the earliest stage of Chinese writing, such as those engraved on oracle bones. Many of them bear a close resemblance to pictorial images of the ideas they represent. The seal script version of “deer,” for example, has lines suggestive of the animal’s antlers, legs, and eye. The seal script version of “water” appears to depict a sinuous stream.

Even characters that require some explanation, such as those representing words related to “sun,” horse,” or “heart,” for instance, are easily identifiable to beginners.

Seal Script Examples



There are other advantages to seal script as well. Learners find that using the brush to write characters in this style is not all that different than writing Roman letters or making an outline sketch, and it allows them to gain practice in brush technique with a minimum of distractions. Completing a composition involving very few seal script characters—or even one—is therefore relatively simple and straightforward, and can be extremely rewarding for beginning or casual students of East Asian cultures.

Another option for easing the transition between writing with pen or pencil and writing with a brush also involves an alternative to standard script. This is starting with clerical script and is the technique advocated by Dartmouth University calligraphy specialist Wen Xing in his recent book,

Hiding the Tip: Gateway to Chinese Calligraphy. Clerical script, like seal script, allows writers to use the brush in a manner similar to the way they might when writing Roman letters. While clerical script characters are less pictorial than those written in seal script, and thus potentially more challenging to beginning learners, their close resemblance to standard script characters might be an advantage for Chinese-language learners. Furthermore, the strong influence of clerical style on running style and cursive style makes knowledge of it useful to those who aspire to more extensive study of Chinese calligraphy.

In short, brush calligraphy can be a powerful resource for educators. As a cultural practice that is linked with East Asian religions, visual arts, thought, and society, it rewards discussion at a wide range of ages and levels—from brief introduction to in-depth study. The simplicity of the brush calligraphy tool kit makes it possible for beginners to explore brush writing without making a deep commitment in terms of either cost or time. On the other hand, in its most sophisticated forms, brush calligraphy can offer a lifetime of satisfaction to students who continue to practice it. ■

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

Chiang, Yee. *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973.

Li, Wendan. *Chinese Writing and Calligraphy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010.

Wen, Xing. *Hiding the Tip: Gateway to Chinese Calligraphy*. Portland, ME: Merwin Asia, 2014.

Videos

Nigensha Publishing Co. Ltd. maintains a YouTube channel with useful calligraphy demonstration videos: <http://tinyurl.com/jrp5o2l>.

NOTES

1. Yuehping Yen, *Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary Chinese Society* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 66.
2. Yahoo Nyūsu, "Tegaki Rirekisho to PC Rirekisho, Anata ga Saiyō Tantōsha Nara Dochira no Jinsai o Erabu? ("If You Were a Human Resources Officer, Which Candidate Would You Choose: the One With a Handwritten Résumé or the One Who Typed It On a Computer?," accessed August 24, 2016.
3. Jiayi Ye, "Calligraphy Education in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language." Presentation given at the 10th International Conference on Chinese Writing and Calligraphy Education, Atlanta, GA, May 21, 2016.

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