



THE PRACTICE OF CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

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The equipment necessary for Chinese calligraphy consists essentially of the *four treasures of the scholar's study*—paper, brushes, ink, and ink-stone—to which, in the case of the amateur, one should add various other accessories: metal or stone paperweights to fix the sheet on which one is working to the table, a porcelain cruet to pour water, drop by drop, onto the ink-stone, a hard-wood brush rack, a brush-rest made of wood or jade, bamboo or porcelain pots, and so on. As they are often precious, all these objects, including the blank paper, which is sometimes of a very expensive quality, may be much sought after by collectors as rare pieces.

What in the West is known as *rice paper* is in fact a Chinese paper fabricated from a pulp made of different plants according to local conditions: young bamboo in Fujian, hemp in Sichuan, rice straw in central China. The best paper is that fabricated from the pulp of the mulberry. Korean paper is also highly regarded. The finest paper that was formerly sought by calligraphers came from the *Pavilion of Spiritual Serenity* during the Southern Tang period (953–975) and was made from bamboo pulp. In later centuries, papers of the Xuande period (1426–1435) of the Ming dynasty and of the Qianlong period (1736–1795) of the Qing dynasty were prized.

The calligrapher's brush is shaped like the core of a jujube: the tuft of hair is drawn tightly together near the

handle, bulges out in the middle, and tapers to a fine point at the end. It must be capable of holding and releasing the necessary amount of ink, and possess sufficient elasticity to resume its shape as soon as the calligrapher relaxes the pressure with which he applies it to the paper. To achieve this elasticity three-tenths of the tuft of hair must be inside the handle. The hair of all kinds of animals has been used: mainly rabbits and goats, but also wolves, foxes, sheep, deer, and pigs. The hair may be more or less hard or soft, depending on whether the artist seeks brush strokes that are strong and vigorous or fine and delicate. The handle is generally only some five inches long, even for the big brushes that are used for the calligraphy of inscriptions; these have a tuft shaped like a large pear and are used to paint on large horizontal wooden panels, such as those bearing the names of pavilions, temples, or palaces.

The ink is a liquid composed of water mixed with fine carbon particles that the calligrapher prepares each time he sets to work. First, he moistens the ink-stone with a little water, and then he rubs the end of a stick of solid ink on the stone's slightly concave surface. The ink sticks are made by mixing glue with lamp black obtained, ideally, from burnt pine wood. The mixture, consisting of two-thirds soot and one-third glue, is cooked for two or three hours and carefully ground; camphor and musk are added to neutralize the smell of the glue. The whole is then molded into little sticks, which may be parallelepipeds or any other shape (for instance, in the form of a pear, a gourd, or a disk). Famous brands of ink sticks are often decorated with delicately painted designs in gold powder, which accentuate the deep black color of the ink.

Ink-stones are made from carefully polished disks of very hard black clay, that from Duanxi in Guangdong, or from the Dragon-tail Mountain in Anhui, being especially prized.

Fig. 1. *Scholars in a Writing Group at the beginning of the Tang Dynasty*. A painting by Qiu Wenbo (ca 950). Portrayed here are some of the eighteen scholars who belonged to the Imperial College, founded in 621 by Li Shimin, the future Emperor Taizong (reigned 626–649), while he was still an imperial prince with the title King of Qin. At the time, the painter Yan Liben, who occupied a post attached to the College, was ordered to paint portraits of its scholars. The originals have been lost, but the painting reproduced here is a copy (possibly imagined) by Qiu Wenbo of one of the portraits painted on that occasion. It is preserved in the Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 2. A set of brushes. Each calligrapher uses a very wide range of brushes of different sizes and varying degrees of hardness (e.g. wolf hair) or softness (e.g. sheep's hair). The big pear-shaped brush is used for the calligraphy of large inscriptions engraved on wooden panels in residences to indicate the names of ceremonial halls, and for the notices that feature on the walls within.



Fig. 3. Objects from a scholar's study. In addition to two pear-shaped brushes are a large water pot for washing the brushes, a little water dispenser for mixing with the ink, a handleless cup, a porcelain container of sealing ink paste, and a cubic porcelain paperweight. Musée Guimet, Paris.

Positioned on the periphery of the working area, these stones, which have been slightly hollowed out into a concave semi-lens shape, are often decorated with various carved patterns.

Usually, calligraphers hold the brush vertically. When using the big pear-shaped brush, they may hold it in their fist, but normally they grasp the handle between the first joint of the thumb and the last joints of the index and middle fingers. The grip is balanced by pressure from the back of the last joint of the ring finger and little finger applied to the brush from behind. This position ensures the best control when manipulating the brush. It is common practice to rest the middle of the fore-arm on the edge of the table, or on a wrist-rest, often made of bamboo, placed on top of the paper. The experienced calligrapher, however, operates without any support, with his fore-arm held aloft. This requires a long apprenticeship, but permits a much greater mastery of the brush-strokes. Such mastery may be observed in the way that the artist attacks, develops, and completes each stroke in one harmonious movement. The strokes are always drawn from top to bottom or from right to left, skillfully modulated according to the infinitesimal variations in the pressure brought to bear by the artist on the paper, and on his brush as he manipulates it in different directions.



Fig. 4. The correct posture of the calligrapher in action. The position of his body and the manner in which he holds the brush provide a perfect example of the Chinese calligrapher's technique.



Fig. 5. Schoolchildren learning calligraphy in Taipei.

Each character, however complex it may be in terms of the number and variety of its component strokes, is, in theory, a perfectly balanced construction, composed in an ideal square, and occupying the same amount of space as all the other characters throughout a given text. It corresponds, in fact, to what is practiced in printing. But in hand-written calligraphy the artist plays in a subtle way with the distinctive strokes of the characters to produce particular effects, through varying the bolder and the finer forms.

The equilibrium of the composition is to be found in the harmony of the proportions between, on the one hand, the characters themselves and the size of the columns of characters, and, on the other hand, between the written elements and the blank spaces left in between them. Huang Tingjian (1050–1110), the great esthete, who was a friend of Su Dongpo and Mi Fu, observed that the trouble with large-scale calligraphy was that the characters were too close together and did not have enough blank space surrounding them, whereas calligraphy in small characters was too spaced out, leaving too much blank space. Well-proportioned blank

spaces produce what is called “breathing space, during the run of characters.” In *cursive*, and sometimes in *running script*, the characters are joined together. The links are made by allowing the ink-line from the last stroke of one character to flow into the first stroke of the next. This line is called “drawing the silk thread.” The *silk thread* is not a brush-stroke as such, so it does not affect the calligraphic breathing space, which depends on the spirit expressed by the whole piece in its overall proportions. This includes various elements, such as the date, the signature—generally written in smaller characters and sometimes in a different style, away from the main text—and one of a whole range of seals, frequently cut by the artist himself, and chosen as being in harmony with his composition.

Bibliography

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