

Foreword

A Cultural Treasure of China

Calligraphy is the quintessence of Chinese culture. Throughout the world, a thousand kinds of written language have emerged. Calligraphers strive to make written scripts look beautiful and elegant, using different artistic styles to meet specific needs. The writing of Chinese characters has developed into a highly specialized art. Chinese calligraphy has flourished over several thousand years and, like painting, sculpture, poetry, music, dance and opera, it is an important member of the family of arts.

Practiced by more people in China than any other art, calligraphy can be found everywhere in the country, and is closely linked to daily Chinese life. Billboards with inscriptions by famous figures are often found in shops and shopping centers, brightening up busy trading areas. Calligraphic works also decorate sitting rooms, studies and bedrooms. Chinese characters are usually written on Xuan paper which is good at absorbing ink. The work is then pasted onto thicker paper with a silk edge, and mounted on a scroll or put into a picture frame, to be hung on a wall. Such works usually contain a poem, a pair of couplets, or a proverb. If the calligraphy is written by the home-owner, it may demonstrate their aspirations and interests, or their literary or artistic talent. A calligraphic work can make a plain wall look more interesting.

Spring Festival couplets are calligraphic works designed specifically for the Spring Festival, the most important festival celebrated in China. Written on red paper, the couplets are



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The traditional sitting room of a scholar.

posted on gateposts, door panels, walls or houses. The characters in the couplets express good wishes for the coming year.

Characters in special styles are used for the headlines of newspapers and magazines, and for the titles of books. The six characters on Chinese banknotes, meaning “People’s Bank of China,” were written by a famous calligrapher. The calligraphic characters or paintings on folded fans are said to reflect the elegance of the user.

The Chinese people have a lifelong bond with calligraphy. A newborn baby’s first photo album contains congratulations



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A running-style calligraphic work by Pan Boying on a fan covering.

written by their relatives with a brush and ink. When a couple gets married, their pillowcases are embroidered with “喜喜” (meaning “double happiness”) in calligraphic style. On somebody’s birthday, a large “寿”, meaning “longevity” in calligraphic style, is hung up in their house.

After someone’s death, the inscription on their tombstone is engraved by a calligrapher. Tourists visiting China can find calligraphic works in pavilions, towers and buildings, and on wooden boards and rocks. The gate-tower of the Shanhai pass at the eastern end of the Great Wall has a horizontal plaque on its eaves, which is inscribed

with five giant Chinese characters meaning “The first pass under Heaven.” They were written by the famous calligrapher Xiao Xian of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), and compliment the beautiful surrounding scenery.



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

Visitors to Mount Taishan in Shandong Province can go to the Sutra Stone Valley to the east of Lonquan Peak, and see the text of the Buddhist Diamond Sutra, carved into a 60,000 square meter rock by a calligrapher



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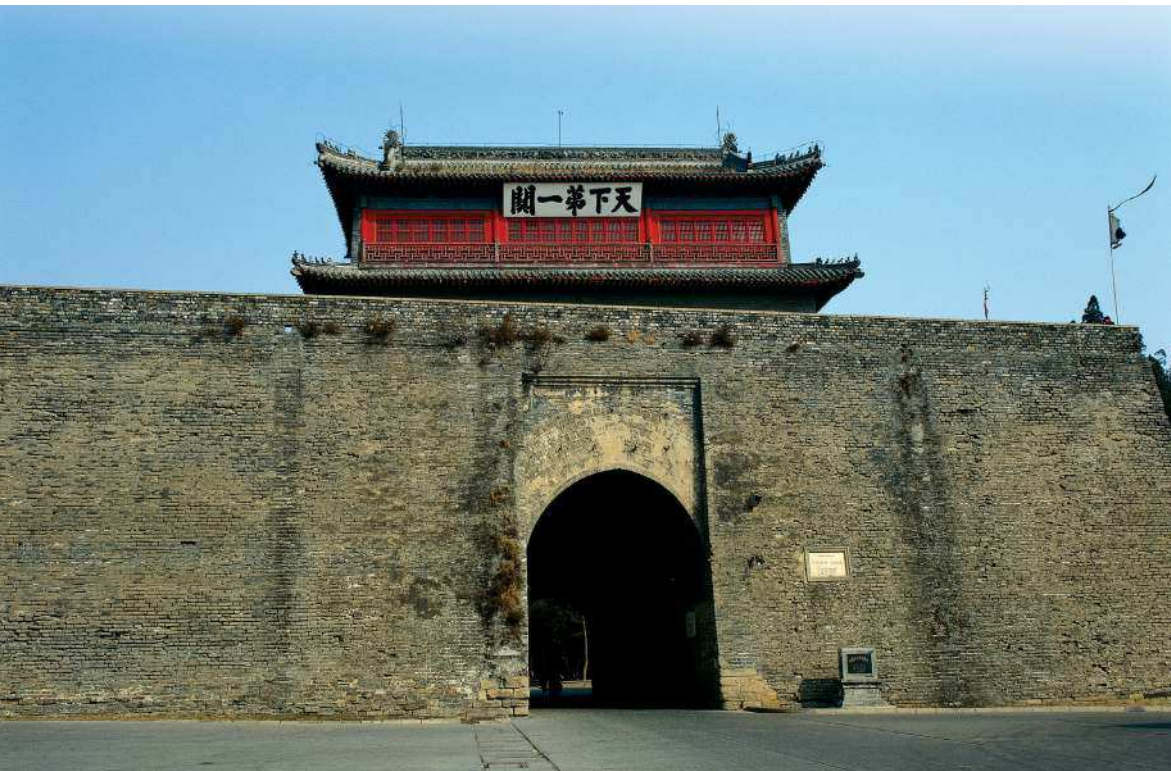
in the sixth century BC. The characters measure between 35 and 50 square centimeters, but only 1,067 of the 3,017 original characters are legible.

In Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, is the Orchid Pavilion, a Mecca for calligraphers in China. On a spring day in the year 353, Wang Xizhi (306–361 AD), who later became one of China’s most distinguished calligraphers, joined forty-one other writers at the Orchid Pavilion to drink wine and compose poems. That day he wrote, in calligraphy, the 324-character *Preface to the Collection of Orchid Pavilion Poems*, for which the Orchid Pavilion is now famous. Xizhi’s calligraphy has been hailed as the “first running hand under Heaven.” Unfortunately, the original version of the preface

Cliff stone inscriptions

Calligraphy or Buddhist figures carved on cliffs or stones can be seen all over China. Cliff stone inscriptions are traditionally believed to work as a spell to prevent bad luck.

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



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

was buried with Li Shimin, the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty (r. 626–249), who was a great admirer of Wang Xizhi and also an accomplished calligrapher. The preface we can see today is a copy produced by Feng Chengsu of the Tang Dynasty.

The Forest of Steles in the ancient capital city of Xi'an is home to the oldest and largest collection of steles in China, and is a treasure trove of ancient Chinese calligraphy, art, classics and stone engraving. More than 2,000 inscribed tablets and tombstones from the Han (306 BC–220 AD) and Tang Dynasties (618–907) are

displayed in the exhibition halls, galleries and pavilions. Built in 1087, the Forest of Steles is now the Xi'an Beilin Museum and is a cultural site under state protection.

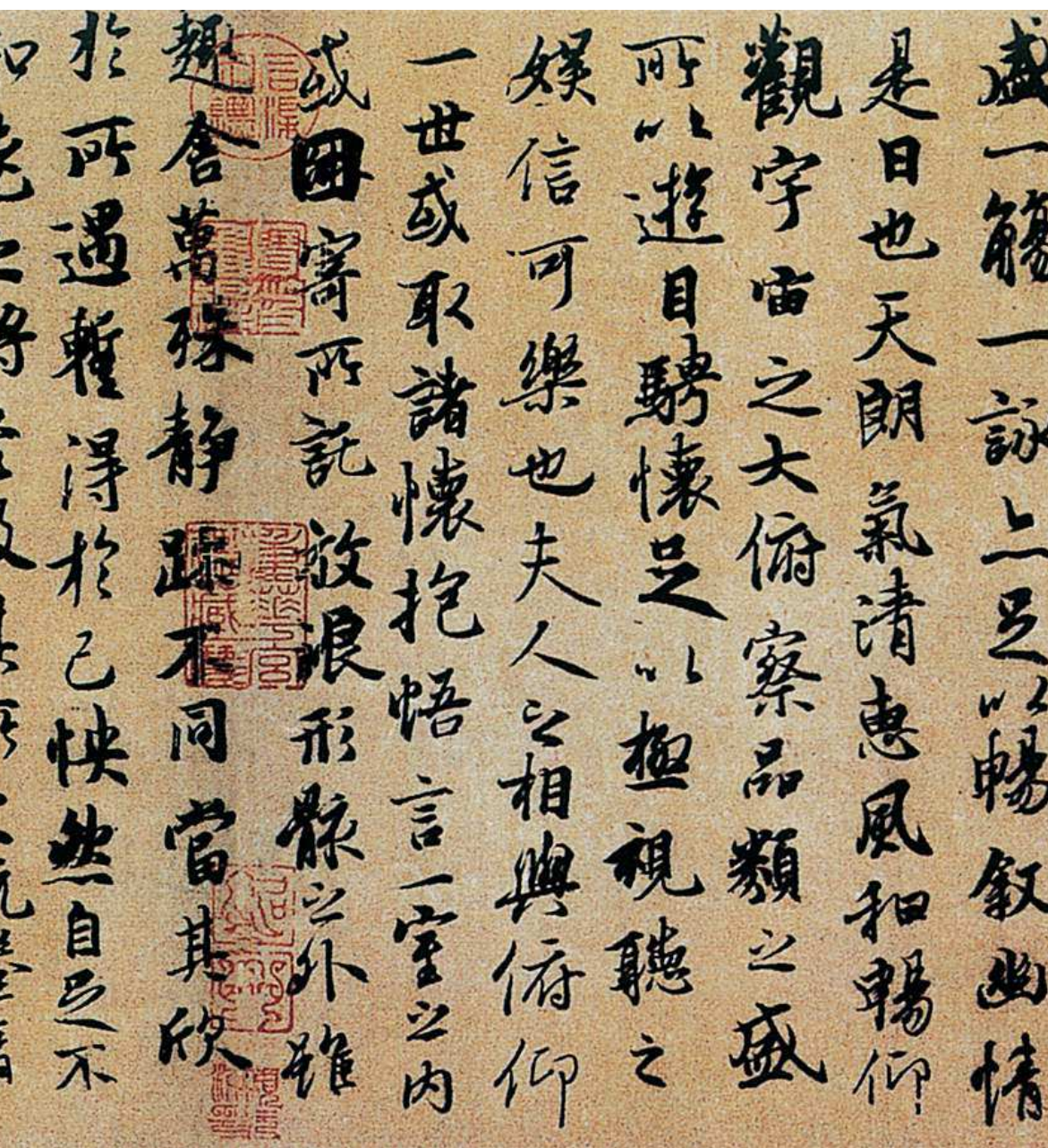
The criteria for assessing calligraphic skills are rigorous. The skills of a writer demonstrate their cultural background, artistic ability and personality. Through the ages, many of China's famous calligraphers have also been painters, thinkers, politicians or scholars, so it is impossible to talk about a person's achievements in calligraphy without mentioning their contribution to other fields.

Calligraphy is the first art that Chinese people learn. When parents and teachers show children how to read characters, as well as simply showing them the lines and strokes, they also encourage them to develop their creativity and appreciation of the art.

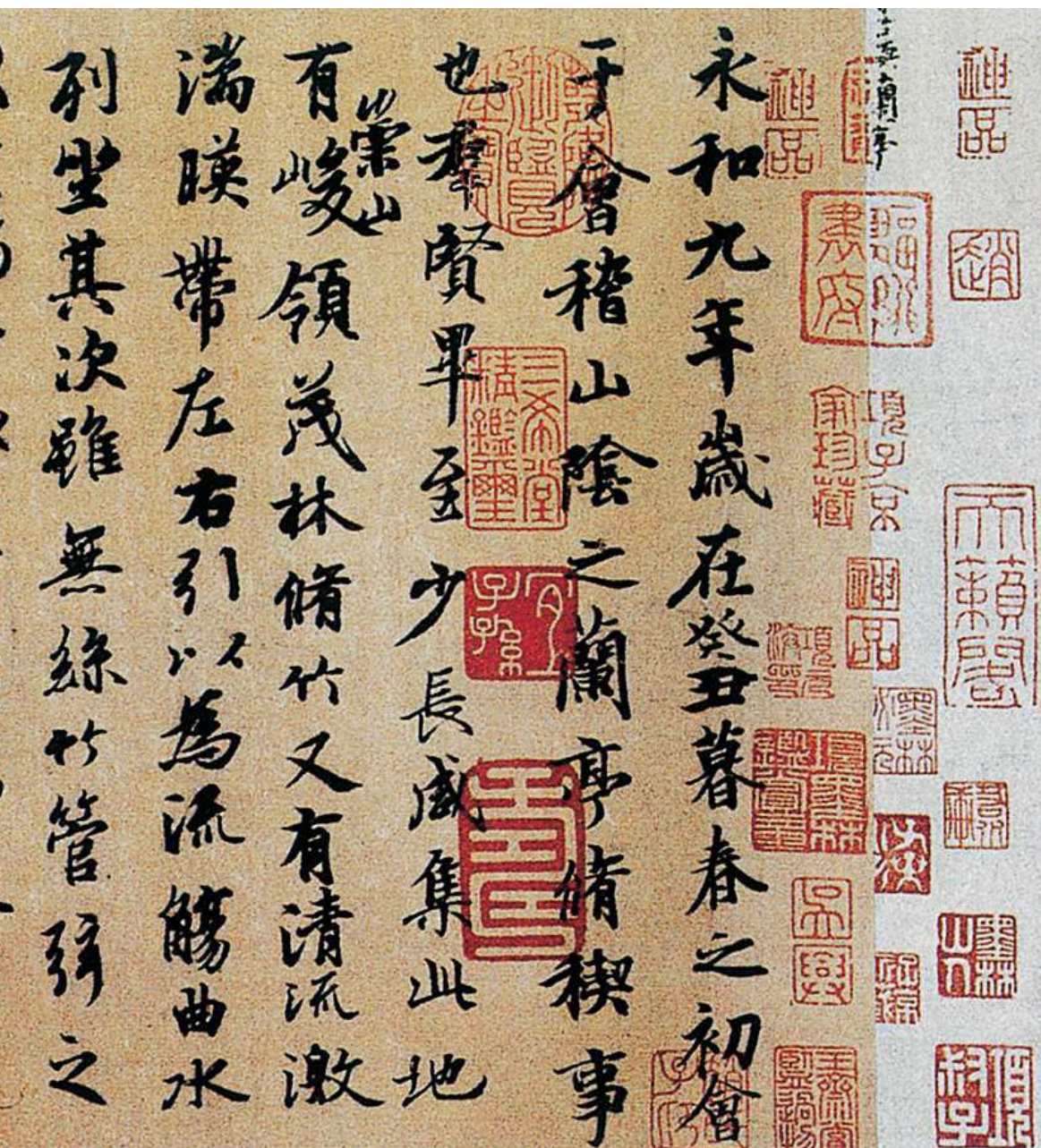
Calligraphy has been called "a painting without images, a piece of music without sounds, a stage without actors and



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Part of the Preface to the Collection of Orchid Pavilion Poems, written by Wang Xizhi of the Jin Dynasty.



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actresses, and a building without components and materials.” Calligraphic works are said to express the essential elements of beauty—balance, proportion, variety, continuity, contrast, movement, change and harmony—through different shapes and line formations. Calligraphy inspires other arts, and vice-versa.

Like music, rhythm is a major element of calligraphy. The dots and strokes in thick or light ink, or in round or square shapes, show strong rhythm, just like change and movement in musical rhythm, expressing the thoughts and emotions of the calligrapher. Theorists of calligraphy describe calligraphic works as “music in the air,” or liken it to “a wonderful piece of music played by an excellent musician.”

Calligraphic works are also said to convey the



The last part of the *Preface to the Collection of Orchid Pavilion Poems*, written by Wang Xizhi of the Jin Dynasty.



Lu Xun (1881–1936).



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A running-script letter by Lu Xun.
 A writer and renowned calligrapher, Lu Xun developed his own simple, smooth style. His works are kept as treasures.

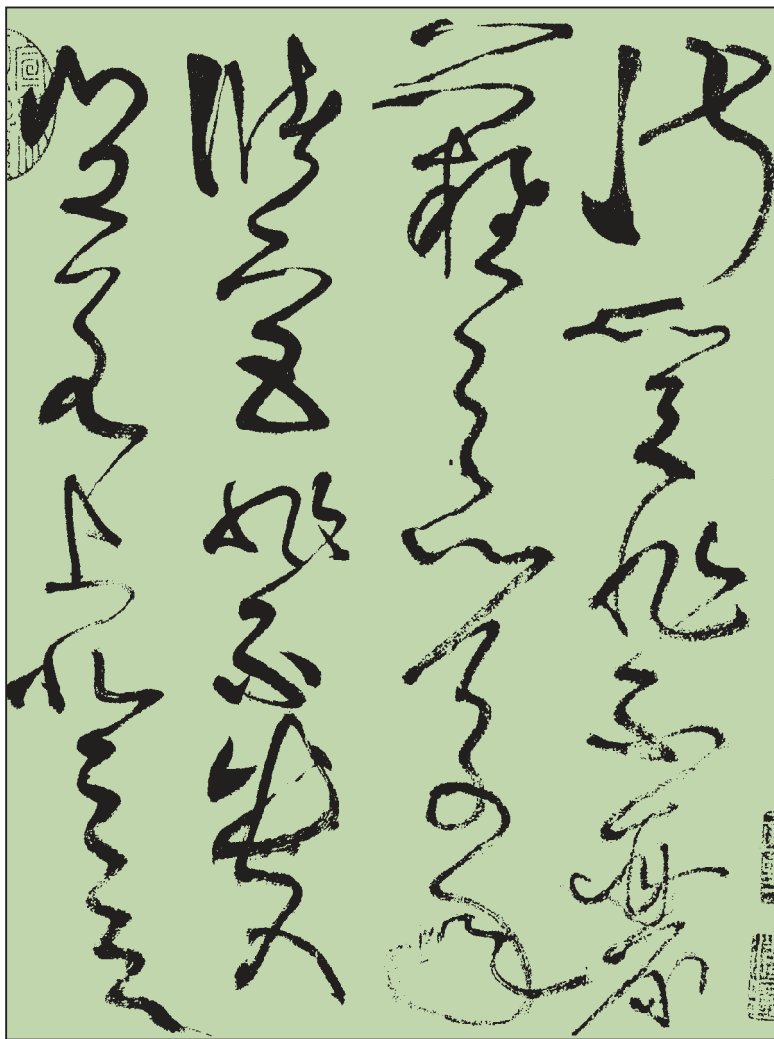
beauty of the body and its movement like the art of dance, as both arts are concerned with space and time. Calligraphy and dance take inspiration from each other. Zhang Xu, a master of cursive-script calligraphy from the Tang Dynasty, was famous for his distinctive rhythms and wild style. Legend has it that his calligraphy was inspired by the “sword dance” (an expressive aerobic dance made famous by the dancer Gongsun during the Tang Dynasty). Through distinctive rhythms and tight movements, this dance expresses various emotions such as joy, sadness, anger, aspiration, demand, bravery and inspiration. The cursive-script calligraphic works of Zhang Xu, the poems by Li Bai (701–762) and the sword dance by General Pei Min were described as “three wonders” by the emperor at that time. The *Four Models of Calligraphy of Classical Poems*, a rare

historic work by the calligrapher Zhang Xu, uses bold and unrestrained characters. The characters are linked together as though they are one, and the space between them varies greatly.

In the 1980s, a Beijing TV Station showed an artistic program entitled “Ink Dance,” which introduced the arts of calligraphy and dance. A calligraphic work would be presented, and a dancer would then represent it through dance moves, reflecting the shapes and meanings of the characters with light steps, soft waist movements and gentle music.



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

Calligraphy is closely related to traditional Chinese painting. Both arts use brushes and Xuan paper, but are different in that calligraphy uses black ink only, while painting applies lots of colors. In bookstores, calligraphic works are often sold with paintings, and the two are usually displayed together

