



Three Strands of Asia
Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat Lecture Series

Lecture Six

**Appreciation of Calligraphy in China, Japan and Korea
September 23, 2014**

Appreciation of Calligraphy in China, Japan and Korea

Ye Xin

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The sixth lecture of the Three Strands of Asia was held in September 23, inviting Mr. Ye Xin, a renowned Chinese calligraphic artist and the board member of Chinese Culture Center at Seoul. The lecture by Mr. Ye elaborated the common standards of appreciating calligraphic works of China, Japan and Korea which emphasize naturalness and vigor in writing styles.

What is Calligraphy?

People often prefer brand new products to old ones when choosing daily necessities like cellular phone. On contrast, they highly evaluate old art works as in selecting porcelains. Similarly, people put more value into the old calligraphic works written by great artists. Yet in the old days, calligraphy was mainly utilized for the practical purpose of recording. It has gradually earned the artistic value as it lost its practical value with the development of convenient writing supplies like pen and computer. This inevitably entails the gap between the past and present perceptions on calligraphy. It is why the contemporary viewers need to learn how to appreciate calligraphy.

Order of Appreciation

Appreciating calligraphy is somewhat similar to observing people. When looking at a stranger, people at first examine the body posture, and later gaze at the facial details. To appreciate calligraphic works, it is important to feel the overall impression and closely look into each character to find out the meaning of the work. In this way, people find the joy similar to that of listening to music. The only difference is that music does not have spatiality. On contrast, calligraphy has spatiality for there are characters on paper whose rhythm corresponds to the rhythm of human emotion.

Good Strokes, Bad Strokes

In this soundless music of calligraphy, the beauty depends on good brush strength. Steadfast stroke adds up vigor, power, energy and dynamics to calligraphic work. Calligraphy critics often use different terms to describe this steadfastness: A stroke that resembles 1) old dry wisteria, 2) clouds that spreads along a long distance, 3) a shiny moon on the sky, 4) rhino's horn and tusk of an elephant, 5) a snake that swiftly hides into a bush and 6) a line on sands made by a sharp gimlet. Another example of beautiful stroke looks after the traces of rain for it lefts ink mark on the paper.

On the other hand, thick stroke with feeble brush work is called 'ink pig' for it looks like flabby sagging flesh. Another bad example is a long, thin stroke similar to a mouse tail.

Writings Following the Law

Writing style can be differ from people to people, yet they all follow the proper grammar. In calligraphy, there is also a law which can be applied to different writing styles. Calligraphic works with different time periods all follow this law. That is, the center of each character is slightly different from one another. The works of the famous calligrapher WANG Xizhi well demonstrate this fact: Words are arranged in vertical columns yet their centers change little by little. The scripts sometimes get bigger in size from left to right. People often think that orderly arranged characters with the same size and color are beautiful. Yet the calligraphic scripts with rhythmic change are the ones with real beauty.

Diverse and Natural Compositional Order

People sometimes are surprised at the gap between their perception and the actual image of the familiar things around them. That is, people do not have clear memory of a thing itself but remember the overall impression. Calligraphy is not an exception in this matter. People often remember how big is the Gwanggaeto Stele, the 5-meter-tall memorial of the ancient Korean king of the late 4th century, but do not have much knowledge of its contents. The careful observation of its stone inscription presents kaleidoscopic feast of scripts with diverse size and dynamic strokes. Change is the nature of the fine arts. Calligraphy cannot be considered as an art form if it is written with dull uniformity in styles. Like a tree whose branches naturally stretch apart, calligraphic work must maintain diverse and natural compositional order.

Calligraphy as an Art Conveying Emotions

In outstanding calligraphic works, the form often corresponds to the content. In this sense, calligraphy and singing have much in common. People get excited for a merry song and become calm for a sad song. Calligraphic scripts similarly convey different kinds of emotions. The works of YANG Ningshi, the renowned calligrapher of the Five Dynasties period between Tang and Song are the typical case. His *'Instructions on Activities of the Divine Transcendent'* boasts dreamlike writing style, as if it were written by a Daoist hermit. On the other hand, neat scripts of *'Leek Flower Post'* well show his appreciation to a friend in return for a delicious meal made by leek flowers. Moreover, the letters on his *'Short Note of Hot Summer'* express his irritation under scorching heat. Good calligraphy well harmonizes the form and the content.

In this sense, a pretty-looking script without any emotion is not beautiful. Feeble strokes with rough edges are not beautiful either. On the other hand, strokes with too much changes seem unnatural.

Bravura performance that has nothing to do with calligraphy is another thing that viewers should avoid. Writing with a gigantic brush that is bigger than oneself, and acrobatic writing with certain body parts are the examples of such performances. The viewers of calligraphy should pay more attention to the heart and beauty of the scripts than those showy performances.

Q & A

1. I wonder when and by whom the standard of good and bad stroke invented. Evaluation for an art work tend to change according to the time. If this standard of good calligraphy is an outcome of certain era, is this old standard still applicable to modern writings?

Here in this lecture, I have presented a few examples which publics can easily understand. The actual standards of evaluation are very complex, developed and elaborated by numerous masters and scholars over thousands of years. In this sense, it is a universal standard supported by large groups of people for a long time and is applicable in evaluating modern works.

Lecture Six at a Glance

1. Strokes

	Good Strokes	Bad Strokes
Description	-Steadfast stroke that adds up vigor, power, energy and dynamics to the work -Stroke with naturalness (ex) ink mark)	-Strokes out of feeble brush work
Example	A stroke which resembles: 1) old dry wisteria 2) clouds that spreads along a long distance 3) a shiny moon on the sky 4) rhino's horn and tusk of an elephant 5) a snake that swiftly hides into a bush 6) a line on sands made by a sharp gimlet 7) the traces of rain	A stroke which resembles 1) pig flesh 2) mouse tail

2. Compositional Arrangements

	Good Arrangements	Bad Arrangements
Description	Arrangements with rhythmic changes	Arrangements with dull uniformity
Example	-the center of each character slightly different from one another -diverse letter size -dynamic strokes	-orderly arranged characters with the same size and color



Correspondence between the form and the content



Calligraphy as an Art Conveying Emotion



Mr. Ye Xin is a renowned calligraphic artist selected as the '10 Prominent Calligraphic Artist of the Year 2012.' He is an expert who actively contributes to the exchange of calligraphy between China and Korea, and has a good knowledge of Korean 'Hangul' calligraphy. He is currently the lecturer and the board member of Chinese Culture Center at Seoul. He was the first Secretary-General of the International Calligraphy Association.

Three Strands of Asia Overview

	Date	Theme	Speaker
Lecture One	2014.2.13	Written Scripts	Professor Emmanuel Pastreich Kyung Hee University
Lecture Two	2014.3.13	Housings	Mr. Kim Kyung Eun Editor of Kyunghayng Shinmun
Special Lecture	2014.4.14	The Making of Northeast Asia	Professor Kent Calder Johns Hopkins University
Lecture Three	2014.5.20	Court Music	Professor Song Hye Jin Sookmyung Womens' University
Lecture Four	2014.6.25	Implication of Confucianism	Professor Shing Jung Geun, Sunkyunkwan University
Lecture Five	2014.7.17	Tea Cultures	Ms. Muramatsu Kanako Chief Representative, Urasenke Seoul Branch
Lecture Six	2014.9.23	Calligraphy	Mr. Ye Xin Board member, Chinese Culture Center at Seoul



Three Strands of Asia is the monthly lecture series by the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) started from February, 2014. This lecture series brings together experts of China, Japan and Korea to explain various aspects of the cultures and societies of the three countries from a comparative perspective. This event is aimed at encouraging balanced and thoughtful understanding of the three countries by investigating similarities and differences.

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