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Chinese Calligraphy

In Chinese culture, there remains one form of art that is not commonly talked about—calligraphy. Decades ago, starting to learn this composition was a challenge for Wai-Hon Lee, my grandfather. It was 1957 when he was first introduced to calligraphy. Throughout the years, he always kept one question in mind, “How do you use the brush?” This kept up his motivation to learn this unspoken piece of culture.

Lee continues the tradition of this ancient Chinese art and reflects on the work of old Chinese masters to improve calligraphy techniques. He remains an artist outside of doing calligraphy, also playing the cello, engineering for holograms, and doing karaoke. Being the creative spirit he is, he practices each of these daily, but spends the majority of his free time in his office doing calligraphy. Spread out across his giant desk, he has piles of rice paper and multiple pencil cups of Chinese calligraphy brushes. He is constantly inspired by the works of the old Chinese masters, and works to improve his own calligraphy. Lee works often, and he has been able to create two scrolls of his work to hang up in his living room and his dining room.

Today, Chinese calligraphy is still prominent in Chinese culture for its artistic significance in relation to the historical context of Chinese characters. For thousands of years, the perfection of this craft was important for Chinese calligraphers to express their language, since calligraphy continues to be a huge part of the beauty of Chinese character writing. However, perfecting this craft is not easy. According to Lee, there is not just one style of calligraphy, and

almost all of them take years of practice to write consistently. He states, “there’s one master and his calligraphy was very strange. It was always lopsided, It’s long on the left side, and everything was squeezed up on the right hand side. We had to imitate his style. It’s very difficult” (Lee). Although calligraphy can be fun and enjoyable, having to learn it is more of a process than you may expect.

Back in Lee’s time in middle school, he struggled trying to learn how to use Chinese calligraphy brushes in class. Each day, he found that the teacher only focused on teaching what was given, and stuck by the books of the great masters’ writings to teach their students. He soon found out that the teacher was unable to demonstrate in a way that wasn’t confusing. They got time to write calligraphy and got assessed on how well they wrote. This teaching strategy never went well though. The calligraphy teacher never examined the process of the writing and only gave criticisms. Lee struggled with calligraphy up to this point, so he continued his search on how to use the brush on his own.

Teaching himself, Lee was able to make his own rules. Being in his own world of expression, he was able to take control of his own work for what he wanted to do and how he wanted to write calligraphy. Lee was able to answer his question on his own. He chose to give himself freedom with his brush holding and how he wrote Chinese characters. Following the stroke order, he loosened his wrist, placed the brush on the paper, and drew. He says,

I remember the first year of holding the brush very tight. In fact, I practiced so much and I remember [that] that year... I [kept] writing [and] writing until my fingers [got all] stiff... Then I noticed, the finger has to be very loose, very relaxed. That was the first breakthrough in my understanding of calligraphy. (Lee)

Taking his time with his own methods, he broke through the Chinese masters' bad writing habits and created his own simpler way of writing. However, his point of view on Chinese calligraphy is unseen by most traditional calligraphers. Although this perspective Lee takes is unordinary, it makes calligraphy easier to pass on to later generations to continue this sole part of Chinese culture. According to *The Artist's Magazine*,

Traditional Chinese or other Far Eastern painting emphasizes ideas, spiritual qualities, brushwork and ink tone. Eastern artists paint on exquisite, thin, unsized (uncoated, thus absorbent) paper or silk. On such a surface, making changes is difficult; therefore, the work must be executed with speed and spontaneity. (Chee)

It was not that Lee changed the course of calligraphy; it was that he was improving upon it. Although the grip of the brush plays a big part in this form of writing, it is also important for its history, which Lee continues to express through his own calligraphy. He continues to learn more about the history of Chinese characters; since all of them have changed as the language has evolved over time. He works on writing the old Chinese characters just as the masters do, to remember this part of Chinese history and to reflect upon the strokes created by them as well.

When working to create Chinese characters his way, he is motivated to continue calligraphy for as long as he can. He is still working on learning more works of the old masters and even improving upon his own style of calligraphy. Lee is focused on helping to create better writing habits for future learners so they can have the same motivation he does when he does calligraphy. *Global Times Metro Shanghai* reports "Chinese calligraphy is a unique skill reflecting a calligrapher's emotions, like sadness or happiness. It has a large number of admirers at home and abroad" ("UK university students in Shanghai attend Study China program."). The emotions he involves in his work and finds doing is what makes Lee find calligraphy as

something interesting. The amount of effort and struggle Lee went through to learn how to do calligraphy shouldn't be as time consuming as it was, and he wants that to change. Although it is important to take that time for improvement, Lee hopes to help others in a way his teachers and masters were unable to do. Being able to grow his own methods of writing, he hopes to teach this to learners so they can better understand how to use Chinese calligraphy brushes. He pushes for this part of Chinese culture to be more appreciated as its abstract artform.

As of right now, he is currently trying to find classes to teach, in an attempt to keep this piece of culture alive. Being a professor and parent volunteer, he hopes to continue to teach people and share his knowledge and wisdom with others. Sadly, Lee has been struggling to find a place to teach at due to the coronavirus pandemic. As schools return to normal, Lee hopes to teach at Mountain View High School.

Chinese calligraphy— although it is not commonly spoken about— is something that should be enjoyed and remembered for future generations as a more prominent part of Chinese culture. Lee states, “Just as simple of a thing calligraphy [seems, it] can teach you a lot of ways of doing things in all areas.” He continues, “That is why I really want to teach calligraphy; because this perspective of how to teach calligraphy is what is not being done up until now... I want to find out whether I can have a class for the students or for the parents” (Lee).

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