

## Chapter 8

# Cultural Considerations of Chinese Calligraphy Using Characters as Visual Language

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### ABSTRACT

*Chinese writing language originated from hieroglyphics. Chinese characters, changing with the development of writing instruments, became pure written symbols. The emergence of calligraphy, one of the highest quality art forms in China, caused the evolution of Chinese characters. Each style in calligraphy reflects the calligraphists' personality, emotion, and the intrinsic motivation behind a message in the script. The author created the characters based on her own style by studying the characteristics of calligraphy and personifying calligraphy as human. The charm of calligraphy was shown by expressing changes in ink thickness and opacity. The author intended to help people who cannot read Chinese to understand emotions expressed within the characters, and combine illustration, calligraphy, and painting characterized by fast-moving ink marks drawn with a writing brush, then imported into computer software for detailed drawing. The purpose of this document is to use case studies to seek optimal art form in illustration.*

### INTRODUCTION

My illustrations convey a new understanding of the relationship between the characters of the English and Chinese alphabets. This new understanding is expressed in the perception of unknown languages, the conversion of words and graphics, and the expression of emotions in words. The first time I had this idea was when I showed Chinese calligraphy to one of my friends who was born in the US and has never learned any Chinese characters. It was very interesting that my friend kept marveling at my calligraphy work when I showed her my practice writing. However, I noticed my friend was reading the calligraphy in the wrong direction; naturally, she was not aware. After I told her the direction of reading was incorrect, she said, "I do not care how to read these characters. I love it because it gives me a very mysterious

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feeling.” This conversation gave me a vague concept. Therefore, I began to consider what should Chinese calligraphy express in addition to its basic meaning, is it a cultural understanding or an emotion?

The answer should be both. Because Chinese characters are derived from hieroglyphics, they are easy to combine with graphics. I started to create sketches when I got this inspiration. When the Chinese characters are converted into human interpretations, the words are revived on paper, explaining their own story. Undoubtedly, this story has narrated about the Chinese culture behind the characters, namely the power of the language and my own intrinsic ideas; they have their own meaning. In addition, because it is in a form of a person, there will be no direction problem when reading.

All in all, the illustrations in the form of calligraphy made me discover the bridge between different country’s writing languages. I began to consciously use another perspective to observe the culture of my own country and try to create some new and interesting ideas.

## THE HISTORY OF CALLIGRAPHY

Chinese calligraphy, 书法 shū fǎ in Chinese, has been considered the quintessence of Chinese culture because it is an art that encompasses Chinese language, history, philosophy, and aesthetics (Li, 2009). For Chinese writing, Xu Shen (1981) in *The Narration of Analytical Dictionary of Characters* explained for the first time the six categories of characters: ‘pictographs,’ ‘associative compounds,’ ‘indicative component characters,’ ‘picto-phonetic compounds,’ ‘shared component characters,’ and ‘phonetic loan characters,’ which showed six different methods of character composition (Zhang & Hu, 2014). Pictographs, as the main method of composing Chinese characters can be divided into two kinds (Frank, 1906, p. 8):

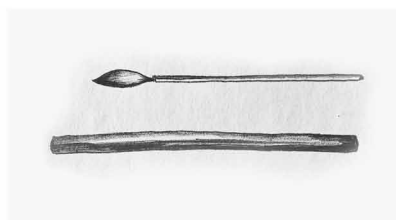
1. Those based on the form of object as  (now 丁), picturing the head or side-view of a “nail”

*Figure 1. Evolution of chinese brush*  
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Metal stylus  
Drawing by Jingying Zhen

From bronze stylus  
referred to  
Zhou Dynasty  
(circa B. C. 500).



Cony hair brush  
Drawing by Jingying Zhen

From Hair-brush referred to  
Qin Dynasty ( circa B. C. 240).  
It is the earliest brush and  
preserved in the Museum of Hunan province, China.



Chinese brush  
Photography by Jingying Zhen

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