

Chinese Calligraphy: a Dance on Paper

The Art of Professor Yang Xin

PRODUCED BY RAYMOND OLSON

DVD, 46 MINUTES, COLOR

SACRED MOUNTAIN PRODUCTIONS, 2015

Reviewed by Jared Hall

Calligraphy is among the most recognizable markers of Chinese culture. Even Americans who have never stepped foot in a Chinatown have likely encountered Chinese characters gracing a takeout restaurant sign or peeking out from a neck tattoo. Partly for this reason, Chinese characters provide an accessible entry point to learning about China and East Asia.

It is a process that can begin as simply as it did for me when, as a young child, I was shown at my local public library how the character for “mountain” was rendered by the expressively pictographic *shan* (山). That introduction to the Chinese written form has stuck in my mind through having the chance to brush the character for myself, presumably with child-safe watercolors. For learners of all ages, calligraphy can be a compelling way to combine hands-on learning with presentation of important Chinese cultural forms.

The documentary film *Chinese Calligraphy, a Dance on Paper: The Art of Professor Yang Xin* is a rare opportunity to learn directly from a master of the form. In this film, we learn from Peking University Philosophy Professor Yang Xin (杨辛), who guides us through the history and practice of calligraphy. He delivered his remarks as part of an August 1998 talk to a group of Western university faculty visitors attending a field studies program with the East-West Center and the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa.

At ninety-four years old, Yang has spent a lifetime committed to calligraphy and the study of aesthetics. Born in Sichuan in 1922, he completed his education before the Communist takeover at what later became the China Central Academy of Fine Arts. He studied under the celebrated European-educated painter Xu Beihong and Marxist portrait artist Dong Xiwen, though settled neither on using Western oils nor the socialist-realism method of art, but instead chose the more traditional genre of calligraphy. By 1960, he had been named head of aesthetics research at Peking University, though his position ultimately made him a target of public denunciation during the Cultural Revolution, when his artistic career was suspended by stints as a carpenter, plumber, and steel plant worker. In the years since, he has resumed his scholarship and committed himself to public engagement. Several English translations of his work reflect that commitment, including the monograph *The Secret World of the Forbidden City: Splendors from China’s Imperial Palace* (2000) and his coauthored *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (2002). In the same year this video was recorded, he was featured in an international exhibition on calligraphy, appeared on Chinese national television, and exhibited at China’s National Museum of Art; and he still appears frequently at events organized at Peking University.

It is a pleasure, therefore, to be led through this film by Yang. The video is pitched, for the most part, at the introductory level. Yang, with the translation support of a colleague, now a professor at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, begins by introducing calligraphy’s development over the centuries, then moves on to analyze several pieces of his work, and finally demonstrates his own brushwork.

The history of calligraphy is framed by Yang as the development of a rudimentary practice to one highly stylized and richly imbued with cultural meaning. Its story begins with images of Yangshao pottery (ca. 3200–2500 BCE), adorned with wavelike line patterns he suggests anticipate the sense of movement of later calligraphic styles. He then turns to a system of pictographs that emerged by the Shang Dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE) that over time came to form the basis for the Chinese written language. The first major forays into standardization, he notes, originated from the state—and later empire—of Qin in the form of large and small seal scripts, forms still practiced by calligraphers today.

After briefly discussing the height of calligraphic art during the Tang Dynasty, Yang’s approach shifts to introducing three major calligraphic styles and placing the art form in cultural context. We learn of the solemn tone of official script, the lighthearted nature of cursive, and the “easy, overflowing” way of the running style. Yang also explains how small red seals stamped by the calligrapher can serve as the artist’s signature or as a marker of the piece’s theme. Illustrating the latter case, he points to a tiger seal that operates as a kind of “footnote” indicating “power.”

As calligraphic practice has grown denser in symbolism over time, its range of artistic expression likewise expanded—to painting, music, and even dance. Indeed, it is the last of these that particularly enthralls Yang and lends the title “dance on paper” to the film. In his seventies at the time of the lecture, he noted that he, like many of his contemporaries, had embraced calligraphy as a form of exercise. Practicing calligraphy in this sense is a mental and physical exercise similar to Daoism and *taiji*.

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This historical and cultural background, while thoughtfully constructed and succinctly conveyed, is perhaps better suited to support instructor preparation than for use in direct instruction. Yang is indeed adept at tying together multiple threads into a carefully woven story of calligraphy, and educators will undoubtedly benefit from viewing the lecture with their own learning goals in mind. Yet, despite this important contribution, grainy footage and muffled audio may strain the attention of students in a high school or university classroom over the forty-six-minute runtime. Subtitles do go some way toward clarifying what is being said. Still, the overall effect is that of a late 1990s home movie, which is essentially how the video began its life.

While important to note the film's limitations, I would not hesitate to recommend incorporating smaller segments of the documentary into a lesson. After all, multimedia materials covering Chinese calligraphy at this level of depth can be difficult to come by. Two segments merit particular mention. First, at the beginning of chapter 3 of the DVD, the camera focuses in on Yang's own works of calligraphy as he describes his technique and symbolism. Among these is my personal favorite, his rendition of "horse" (馬). In his voiceover, he recounts spending three years perfecting the strokes that beautifully "express the spirit of a galloping horse." Several other characters are discussed, including the more interpretive "orchid" (蘭) that appears on the cover of the DVD case.

In chapters 7–9, Yang demonstrates his art by providing live demonstrations of his calligraphy, including the two characters for horse and orchid. We see him begin by preparing his own ink and then embarking on his own "dance on paper." Along the way, he introduces several techniques that provide particular expression to his work. He alters the ink itself by adding pigment to his black ink and diluting it with water. He also discusses how choice of one's paper or simple treatments like twisting the paper can increase or decrease the capacity of the ink to saturate and spread. One of these choices is demonstrated as he dabs the ink, keeping his characters from stretching farther across the paper.

These two portions of the film seem particularly well-positioned to be paired successfully with a student-centered activity. Such a lesson might begin with a brief background informed by Yang's lecture. Next, students could be divided into groups to read about, analyze, and present one of the major calligraphic styles. Together, the class could then view the two video selections above, perhaps emphasizing the characters for horse and orchid. Then, instructors might invite students to engage in a hands-on activity imitating the major calligraphic style they presented, along with one of Yang's characters. Such an activity might also draw on excellent free online resources from the Asia Society, Columbia University's *Asia for Educators*, or the Smithsonian Institution's Freer-Sackler Museums of Asian Art.

If employed carefully, this film can be an excellent resource for educators looking to bring culture to the forefront of their lessons on China. ■

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My Life in China

DIRECTED BY KENNETH ENG

PRODUCED BY EHREN PARKS, MELANIE BLAIR, MENG XIE,
TAKAYO NAGASAWA

DVD, 81 MINUTES, COLOR, 2014

LANGUAGE: TOISHANESE (A CHINESE DIALECT)
WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Reviewed by Carol Stepanchuk

*Yau King walked for seven days, six nights,
and swam for five hours . . .*

Not all of us have directly faced the challenges of immigration, but in many classrooms, there will be one or more students who have firsthand experience. Their stories and the growing body of published first-person accounts can open an immediate window for students into the ongoing immigrant experience and feelings of immigrant pioneers. Through the storytelling of new arrivals, we can also begin to examine our place and context within this landscape of settlement—how do we encounter and build on visions of mobility and opportunity?

Kenneth (Kenny) Eng's documentary film, *My Life in China*, featured in the PBS series *America ReFramed*, vividly exemplifies the impact of firsthand accounts and may provide an enriching resource for classes on history, language, and cultures. This is a touching and compelling narrative that offers a glimpse to students about the unique circumstances surrounding the incorporation of Asian immigrants into American society, something that is acknowledged little in textbooks.

Yau King's Story

Eng's film traces his father's steps on a journey from Boston to his home town in southern China, a few kilometers from the coastal city of Toisan in Guangdong Province. Yau King Eng left China in 1966 for America and now takes a trip homeward to find resolution in retirement, to answer the question of where he should spend his remaining years: in the Chinese village where he grew up or the urban American city where he spent most of his life?

The film takes us through Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, and finally Toisan, drawing the viewer in through vignettes, often of marketplaces and cooking, themes central to the family visits he makes along the way. From gathering fresh greens and live lobsters in Boston's Chinatown to simmering broths at home on the kitchen stove, Yau King makes their meal before departure and explains to his son at dinner, "I left China because I had to . . ."



Yau King leaving Boston's Chinatown with groceries for the evening meal. © 2014 *My Life in China*