

The Charm of Calligraphy

– What the Future Holds –

By Takeda Souun

I am currently involved in a range of activities as a calligrapher. As an artist, I put my calligraphy on display in private exhibitions, in books and through the media. I occasionally cooperate with famous musicians by doing improvised writings during their performances. I sometimes teach in calligraphy classes and write company logos or film titles. But before I write further about myself, let me explain some of the history of calligraphy.

■ The Origins of Kanji

At present, *kanji*, or Chinese characters, are used mainly in Japan, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but where did they come from in the first place? When

did they come to Japan and how have they evolved? The prototype of modern-day kanji is said to have appeared as long ago as the 17th century BC in the ancient Chinese Yin Dynasty, in what are called oracle bone characters, inscribed on bones and tortoise carapaces.

Kanji are essentially a form of pictograph. For example, the kanji for *ki* (tree) and *mori* (forest) are symbols that represent a picture of a tree or trees. They were originally used symbolically for communication or to convey messages to future generations, and as society became more advanced and culture developed, these characters that had previously functioned merely as symbols became ideograms with an aesthetic sense, thereby graduating to calligraphy.

Photos: Takeda Souun Office



The author performing at the New Year event in 2006 (left), and a Swiss watch makers' event in 2004.

As paper came into use, the tools used for writing changed. The advent of a simple brush with animal hair (mainly from horses or sheep) attached to the end of a stick enhanced the aesthetic sense, and in around 300 AD, the great Chinese calligrapher Wang Xizhi appeared on the scene. From that point on, many calligraphers began to compete in developing the beauty and power of calligraphy. It was around that time that kanji were finally introduced to Japan, where it is said that no proper writing system had existed previously. Japanese in those days were probably very impressed by the beautiful characters they saw written as calligraphy. Despite being from a completely different language system, kanji slowly but surely became established in Japan, although it would seem that this was by no means an easy process.

The Contribution of Buddhism to the Spread of Kanji



Buddhism made the greatest contribution to the spread of kanji. The religion came to Japan from China and the Korean peninsula, and as it spread rapidly through Japan, so did kanji. Thanks to the practice of *shakyo* (transcribing Buddhist sutras), writing with a brush and ink on paper became a part of everyday life. At first it was limited to an imitation of the Chinese style, but before too long calligraphers here developed their own distinctively Japanese feel. Finally, in the Heian Period (794-1192), the uniquely Japanese writing system of *kana* appeared. Kana is the original form of *hiragana*. In modern Japan, two kinds of writing systems are used, kanji (multiple meanings and readings in one character) from China and hiragana that were developed only in Japan (syllabic writing units). The fundamentals are still essentially Chinese, but a unique Japanese method and aesthetic sense have developed. Works that transcended merely beautifully written characters grew in popularity. These works possessed a definite artistic air; various genres were born and many people studied calligraphy.

Kanji Have no Borders

I want to use calligraphy to convey messages to as many people as I can, and to express the true allure of calligraphy. When I returned to calligraphy's original goal of delivering messages, I decided to convey my feelings to the world using the calligraphy that I had learned from my mother since I was a child. In this respect, calligraphers, painters and musicians are no different. The unique feature of calligraphy is that it is extremely simple, it exists in black and white and is created only with one soft brush. It goes without saying that there are levels of ability, good and bad, likes and dislikes in calligraphy. For calligraphers, the most significant difference with painters is that letters and words are involved.

The reason why I decided to step onto the world stage was that I had a quite unbelievable experience. I was holding an exhibition at Narita Airport when I saw an American standing in front of one of my works. When I spoke to him he showed me his goosebumps. There was no need for words. I was thrilled that the message in one of my works had somehow got through to someone who knew nothing of kanji. Since then exhibitions I have held in cities such as Brussels, Geneva and Moscow have produced responses regardless of the ethnicity of the audience. I remember a Russian woman who gave me a kiss because she was moved by my works, making me realize that calligraphy has no borders. I understood from these experiences that, depending upon the approach, the aesthetics and fundamental aspects of calligraphy that have been refined in Asia over several thousand years can also be appreciated by people from countries where kanji are not used. Because of my desire to convey messages to the world, I included English and Chinese translations in *Tanoshika*, my recently released selection of works. All of humankind is connected in one way or another, and I would like to continue activities that allow me to sense that all the more. Perhaps one day, calligraphy will be recognized throughout the world as an art form. **JS**

Takeda Souun is a calligrapher. He performs internationally and his works are used in the titles of books, films and TV programs.