Yashima Gakutei (Japanese, c. 1786–1868), "Calligraphy Brush,"
from *Four Friends of the Writing Table for the Ichiyō Poetry Circle*

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TALES FROM CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

Nancy Penrose

A laughing wind will fly and whirl upward;
dense clouds will arise
from the Forest of Writing Brushes.

—Lu Ji (188–219 CE)

I WAS ILLITERATE. TO MY EYES THE lines and dots of Chinese writing were little more than mystic squiggles. Yet I was living in Singapore where the characters flock upon signs, windows, shops, and scrolls, even grocery receipts. Then I met an artist, a Chinese calligrapher, whose lessons led me through the mysteries of this ancient art.

I was a trailing spouse, trailing after my husband, David, whose work was transferred to Singapore. Delving for definition beyond wife, mother of kindergartner Claire, expatriate outsider, I asked: *Where would I fit? What would fill that space in self left empty by our move from Seattle?*

In a catalog from the Department of Extramural Studies at the National University of Singapore, I came across evening classes, like extension classes at home. A place to go. A reason to be present. I found enticing phrases: the history of Chinese calligraphy; taught in English; learn how to write. I signed up.

Singapore was an easy place to live. The city state—a tiny island sitting at the tip of the Malay Peninsula—had abundant schools and universities, a fine rapid transit system, and an

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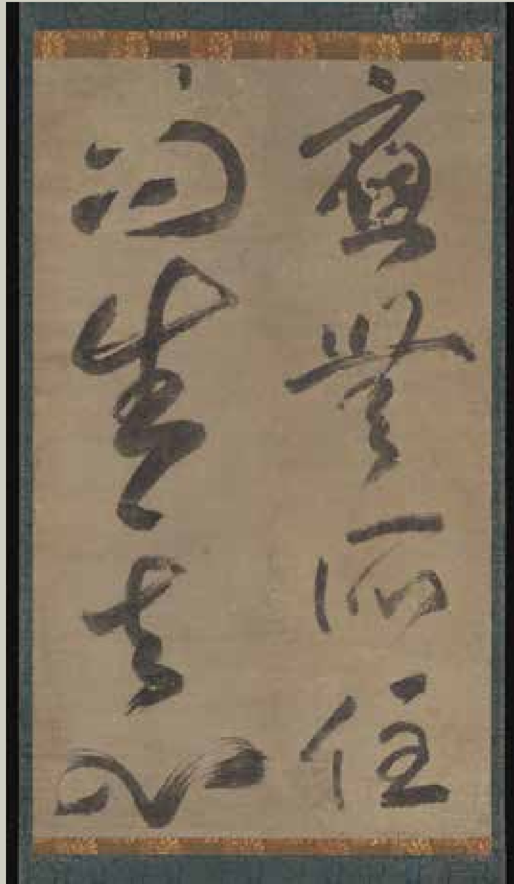

Muso Soseki (1275–1351), *Abiding nowhere, the awakened mind arises*

international airport that travelers always ranked as tops. The once-British colony was saturated with English—the language of education, business, and tourism. Most Singaporeans were the descendants of immigrants, outsiders who had merged into the Tamil, Malay, Eurasian, and Chinese cultural melange so distinctive to the island.

I arrived early for the first class. As the other students entered and sat at the rectangular wooden tables arranged in rows, I saw I was the only non-Chinese. A middle-aged man came in carrying a small satchel and a roll of white paper tucked under his arm. The teacher. He had well-barbered black hair free of gray and was dressed like a Singaporean businessman—black pants and a white shirt with long-sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Later I learned he had inherited his father's business in the coffee trade but sold it to concentrate on calligraphy. He walked quietly to the front of the room, glanced at us, smiled, and said, "Good evening. I am Khoo Seow Hwa." His cordial tone soothed my sense of separateness.

He was a blend of calm intensity that was broadcast by his dark eyes. In Chinese-inflected English he spoke fast, as if constantly pressed by the meager time of an eight-session class. Indeed, he was on a mission: to fill a lacuna in the cultural heritage of my fellow students, the English-educated Chinese; to immerse them in the highest form of art, the writing of characters with brush and ink.

Among the younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans there were many who spoke a southern dialect—Hakka, Hokkien, or Cantonese—learned from parents or grandparents. But educated in English, they knew little of how to write the language of their ancestors. A few of my classmates could read quite well—the characters are the same no matter the dialect. I was the most deeply ignorant student, the only one who could not even speak a form of Chinese. No one seemed to mind. The teacher was welcoming and so I stayed.

Khoo was a master and he buzzed with passion for the art. His calligraphy was praised not only in Singapore but also Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and in the great motherland of the art, the People's Republic of China. He was an honored scholar, the author of numerous articles and books on Chinese literature, culture, philosophy, and calligraphy. But nothing in English, his second language.

At the first class he sketched the 5,000-year arc of Chinese writing that had begun with simple pictographs inspired by nature. I looked around and realized with a twinge of envy that all my classmates shared in this long traverse of history. My own cultural heritage, grounded in pioneers who arrived in the American west in the 1800s, suddenly felt very recent and very thin.

Khoo called us to gather around him at the front of the room. Arrayed on his table were the tools of the artist—the Four Treasures of the calligrapher's studio: brush, paper, ink, and stone.

Brush— The cone-shaped tuft is made of animal hair—mouse, horse, deer, rabbit, goat, even wolf. Short hairs surround a core of long hairs to create a space, a reservoir for the ink. Some brushes are hard and stiff, recommended for beginners learning control. Some brushes are soft and supple and require the skill of a master. A hollow bamboo tube is the most common holder for the tuft, although extravagant treasures are made of gold or silver or jade.

Paper— Two types: raw and mature. Made of a mix of hemp, bamboo, paper mulberry *(Broussonetia papyrifera)*, and rice, although the best is composed of bark from a species of elm, *Pteroceltis tatarinowi*, that grows in Anhui, China. Raw paper is absorbent, more sensitive to the expert's brush, but also used by beginners as it is often cheap and gridded with red lines that define the space for each character. Ripe, or mature, paper is sized, coated to decrease absorbency, more receptive to fine and detailed styles of writing.

Ink— Traditionally black, except for gold at the New Year. Beginners use liquid ink, premixed in a plastic bottle, convenient and cheap. Experienced calligraphers grind their ink from a molded stick of pine soot and glue. The grinding is a ritual of preparation, a meditative prelude to the writing. Mixed with water, the ink should be as dark and pure and fresh as the pupil of a child's eye, Khoo said. Good ink binds with paper and lasts for centuries.

Inkstone— Flat with a hollow to hold the ink. The surface of the inkstone should not be too smooth or it will take too long to grind the ink, not

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too coarse or the ink will be granular. Often decorated with bas reliefs of intricate design, the finest stones are of volcanic rock, a liver-red tuff from the Chinese province of Guangdong.

"Writing calligraphy begins with a quiet mind," said Khoo as he smoothed a scroll of white paper unfurled on the table in front of him. The noisy brain must be stilled, a calm focus cultivated.

He picked up a brush and dipped it in the ink. It was the first time I had seen a Chinese calligrapher at work. His back was straight, his body balanced. The fingertips of his right hand lined the bamboo holder held perfectly vertical. Ink met paper. The brush crouched and leapt like a lion, then twisted and turned like a ballerina traveling across a stage of white paper from top to bottom, right to left. A halt for more ink. Then the flow of black strokes and dots continued, some thick, some thin, some swirling, some straight, as if the painted strings of characters were dancing to an unheard rhythm, an unheard song.

He stopped. As the ink dried, he read the words to us, first in Chinese that sang along a roller-coaster scale of tones, then in choppy English as he paused to cast for the best translation. He had chosen part of a poem from the Tang Dynasty and written it in Xing Shu, one of six primary writing styles. There was a character for mountain, with one long, two short vertical strokes that rose to a peak; for horse, with four dots for legs; and for water, with the sinuous lines of a river. These characters held the imprint of the

Yuan Zhi (Chinese, 1502–1547), *Folding Fan Mounted as an Album Leaf*

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"'Writing calligraphy begins with a quiet mind,' said Khoo . . . The noisy brain must be stilled, a calm focus cultivated.'"

elements they represented, evidence of the binding forces between nature and the pictograph origins of writing.

Xing Shu, which Khoo translated as the Walking Style, should remind the viewer of a person with a fluid and graceful gait, he explained. Compared to other more prescribed styles, the Walking Style could be written rapidly and allow calligraphers more expression. A good Xing Shu, he said, should create invisible but sensed links between the characters. In more cursive and abstract styles, the words would actually be joined.

Khoo led us through the composition. He waved his hand over the flow of black and pointed to the white spaces as if the piece were abstract art. Perhaps for my sake, he told us that Picasso had once said that if he had been born Chinese, he would have been a calligrapher not a painter, so drawn was he to the abstract qualities of the writing.

Along one side of the piece, Khoo said he might add an artist's statement, a brief phrase as to why and when he had written, perhaps who was there for the creation. To finish, he would add balance to the blank space toward the bottom with his signature seal. This small block of stone with characters carved into one end is also called a chop. When stamped with a paste of cinnabar, castor oil, and silk strands, the chop adds a balancing rap of red to a composition. He might stamp a second seal, a leisure seal. He pronounced "leisure" in the British way—"lehzure." Serious calligraphers may own several hundred such personalized chops that express the owner's philosophy or extol a person or place. One of Khoo's leisure seals honored his studio and translated as "the forgetting everything study room," he said, for when he was in his writing place all else in the world fell away.

In the second class, I wrote a word for the first time. For a character to be correct, Khoo explained, the strokes and dots must be written in a prescribed order, usually from top to bottom, left to right, outside to inside. He checked our faces to be sure we understood and then turned to the blackboard. He chalked the word for "everlasting"—*yong*. He numbered the strokes and drew arrows to show the proper motions of the brush. *Yong* contains all the basic strokes and dots used in Chinese calligraphy. My English-educated eyes saw a graceful lower-case "k" joined to a lower-case and dotted "i," the welding balanced by two short strokes like the head of an arrow sweeping in and upward from the left.

永 yong

I squeezed a trickle of black from the bottle of ink into a small white porcelain dish. I liked the smell, like dark earth. I picked up my brush. Khoo told us we must grip the holder tightly with our fingers and thumb, like squeezing a straw, but we must keep our palm loose. Impossible, it seemed to me, yet he assured us that it was essential to the practice. I dipped the tuft, filled it with ink, and touched it to the paper. The ink flowed but did not run. Black ink on white paper. Such a pleasing contrast.

Like a child, I practiced *yong* over and over, working to properly fill the grid of red squares on my beginner's paper: first the dot at the top, then the stroke below, the two strokes forming the arrowhead on the left, and finally the top half of the "k" with the lower part as the last stroke. Like all characters, *yong* is captivating when written well, a self-contained work of art. I was embarrassed by my brushwork that careened outside the lines in messy blobs of black, but even in my crude strokes I tasted awe for mastery of the art.

Over the next few weeks I observed, I admired, I puzzled, I listened, I studied, I watched, I lifted brush, I dipped, I stroked, I dotted, I copied, I copied, I copied, I corrected, I began again, I lifted brush, I dipped, I stroked, I dotted, I repeated, I repeated, I repeated. I completed a character worthy of praise—for the first time. Khoo was standing behind me. He pointed to a character I had written earlier. "Who did this?" he asked. "I did." "Unh?" He grunted in disbelief. "It's very good!" he said. I smiled at his surprise but was surprised myself, pleased.

I began to understand the infinite possibilities of writing with a brush. Compared to Western forms of calligraphy, so constrained by the Roman alphabet, Chinese characters "display a handsome variety in the shapes of the strokes, and each stroke may contain an individual variation of form, passing from the slender to the bold," wrote Chiang Yee in his 1937 book, *Chinese Calligraphy*. As for the place of calligraphy in Chinese art, he wrote, "calligraphy is the most fundamental artistic manifestation of the national mind. Rhythm, lines, and structure are more perfectly embodied in calligraphy than in painting or sculpture, and even form and movement appear in it in at least equal measure."

Khoo taught us by telling stories about the great and memorable Chinese calligraphers. Slipped into the tales behind the brushstrokes were lessons on philosophy, history, custom, government, and evolution of the writing styles. The stories ranged from ancient to modern—the calligrapher who dipped his hair into ink and used his head like a brush to write on the wall; the calligrapher who invented the Flying White Style and wove images of birds and flowers into the characters;

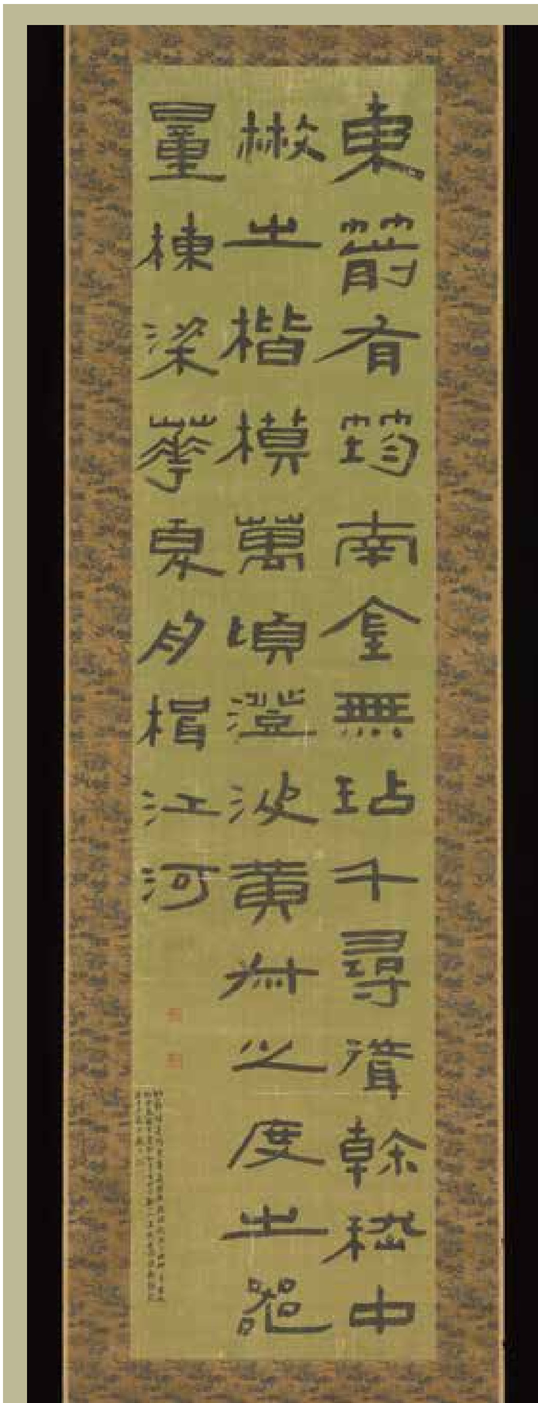
Qian Xuan, *Wang Xizhi Watching Geese*, ca. 1295

This handscroll illustrates the story of Wang Xizhi (303–361), the calligraphy master of legendary fame, who was said to derive inspiration from natural forms such as the graceful neck movements of geese.

image credits

the calligrapher who used a writing style that resembled scattered cobblestones on a muddy lane; the calligrapher who was considered a traitor for his cooperation with the hated Mongol dynasty and whose calligraphy was said to be spineless; the calligrapher who said writing calligraphy should be like riding a horse without a bridle; the calligrapher who took inspiration from the wings of wild geese in flight and from the rhythm of a school of fish; the calligrapher who wrote in a script so tiny it fit on a watermelon seed. But the greatest of them all was Wang Xizhi, who composed the most revered masterpiece in Chinese calligraphy, the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, written on an afternoon in late spring in 352 CE in Shaoxing, China, at a gathering of slightly drunken poets and calligraphers. Wang Xizhi's calligraphy that day was loose and free and beautiful and has been copied over and over through the centuries, the pinnacle to which all calligraphers aspire.

At the end of our last class, Khoo asked me a question: Would I like to



Chen Hongshou (1768–1822)

collaborate on a book? He knew I was a writer. He had dreamed for many years of a book in English on Chinese calligraphy, written in an informal and friendly style, he explained, not academic. Such a book did not exist. He said his English was not good enough to write it without help.

I said yes. I was captured by the art and by his passion. He said he could not pay me. I said no problem. The project offered a path to identity in this new place. It was a lucky offer to an outsider in residence. I told him I was honored to be asked, to be invited to work with a master. We agreed to meet the following week.

Before our first session he faxed me an outline for the book. It was the skeleton of his class on paper: how to appreciate Chinese calligraphy; the writing styles and history of its development; the study and practice of the art. At the heart, as in his class, were the stories of the great calligraphers.

I set our first meeting for a morning when our housekeeper, Mary, would be in our apartment. We lived on the fifteenth floor of Poinciana Tower in Pandan Valley, near the Singapore American School where Claire was in kindergarten. The complex was old for Singapore, built in the 1970s, and was rather simple, not luxurious, but we had a view of Bukit Timah, a park in the center of the island that held one of the last stands of primary rain forest. The green was soothing to look upon, a break from the concrete and density that filled our view looking east toward Orchard Road.

I moved my computer from the intimacy of my small office on the second floor into the open spaces of the dining room on a table near the kitchen where Mary was working. I wanted to create comfort: for Khoo, entering the home of a Western woman he barely knew; for me, inviting a man I barely knew into my apartment.

He arrived. We greeted each other a little too loudly, made nervous chatter about the weather, how the rain had made it cool enough to switch off the air conditioning. We were both awkward in this new setting, but trying to cover our discomfort. He left his leather loafers at the door, adding them to the jumble of sandals and shoes my family had kicked off there in the custom of going shoeless inside an Asian home.

As I stood beside him—me in bare feet, he in black socks—I was sharply aware of the difference in our heights. At six feet, I was several inches taller. I offered him coffee but he refused. "Very bad for me," he said, pursing his mouth and waving his hand in a gesture that spoke no. He explained that his years tasting brews in the coffee trade had ruined his stomach. We decided on tea. Keeping a respectful distance between our chairs, we settled side by side in front of the computer that sat on the table like an empty container waiting to be filled.

和

HARMONY

He began with the origin of Chinese characters, the story from the reign of the **Yellow Emperor**, a semimythical ruler said to have reigned for exactly one hundred years beginning around 2700 BCE. The Emperor had an official scribe, **Cangjie**, who observed the shapes of tree shadows, the print of a bird claw in the dust, and from these took inspiration and inscribed the first pictographic characters onto sticks. According to this ancient tale, when Cangjie created the characters, the gods sent heavy rains, loud thunder, and great earthquakes, so upset were they that a human had unlocked the code to the mysteries of the universe.

As he spoke, my fingers pattered and the keyboard clicked. He stopped and waited for me to catch up with the rhythm of his words. He asked about the best way to express "much grace." "Graceful," I answered and we finished a

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sentence about one of the more cursive writing styles. We stopped to discuss how best to describe the concept of writing as a battle, how the mind and heart of the calligrapher take the role of general; the shoulder, arm, wrist, hand, and palm are the senior officers; the five fingers the soldiers.

The work bloomed and filled the spaces of our early awkwardness. He used no notes. He had it all in his head. Later, after he left, I would rewrite and smooth and pour my own shape into the stories. This became the pattern for the project as we found the right words to express this ancient Chinese tradition.

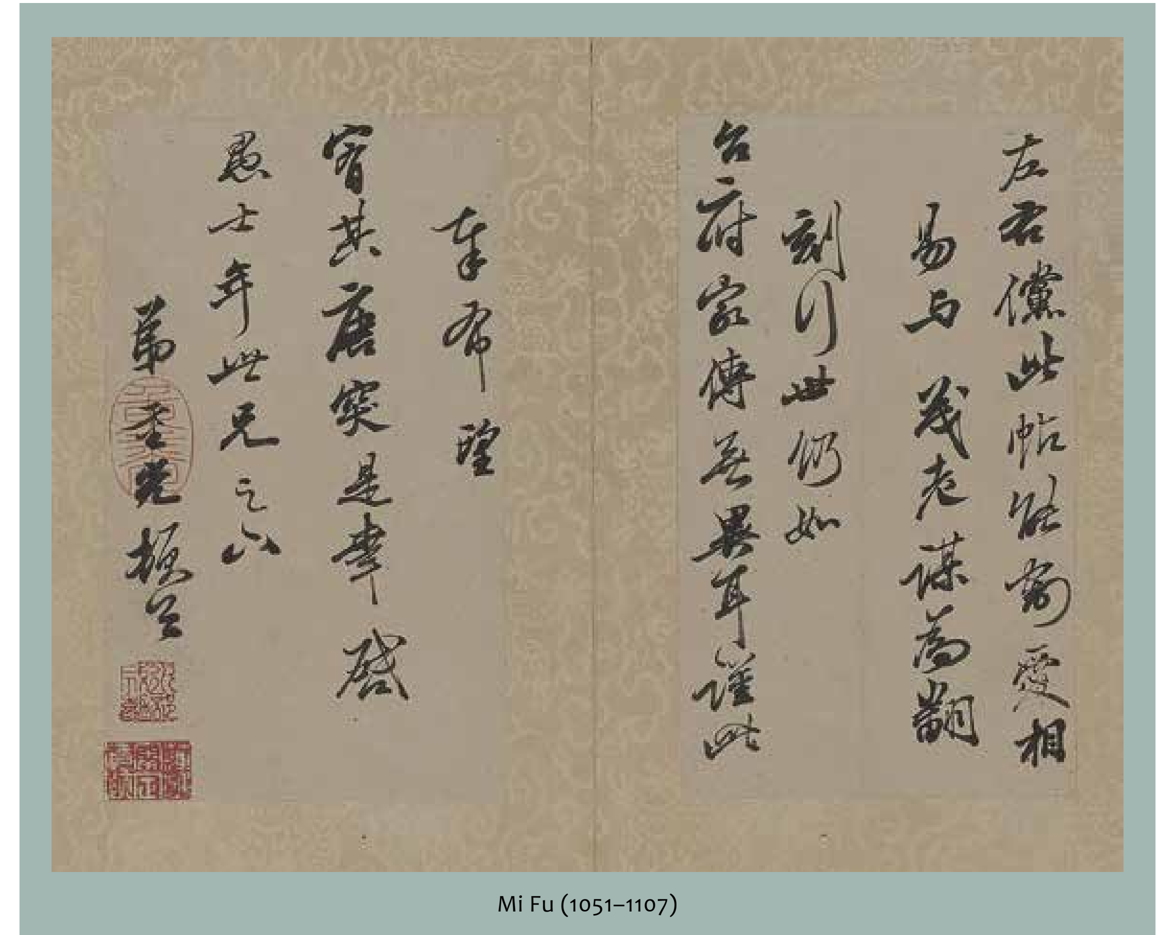
The poet Lu Ji wrote of a laughing wind flying upward and dense clouds rising from the Forest of Writing Brushes. As Khoo and I worked on the book, we hoped that our transformations into English, our transpositions across cultures would send dense clouds of knowledge arising from the forest of our words about brushwritten characters. At times, writing in English about the art of Chinese calligraphy felt like two contradictory ideas, more complicated even than Lu Ji's description of writing about writing as "hewing an ax handle with an ax handle in my hand." But Khoo and I did not let the contradictions distract us. We used them to create a third idea, an amalgam of our vistas from inside and outside the art.

"Calligraphy soaked into my life the way ink soaks into paper."

We continued to meet once or twice a week for eight months. At the end of each session, I faxed Khoo my rewritten version of the day's work. He would comment; I would revise. Our commitment to the book did not flag. We never spoke of not finishing.

I always called him Mr. Khoo. I could not bring myself to use the usual Chinese address of only his family name; it felt too informal to my American ears and heart, too lacking in respect. He called me Professor Penrose, honoring me from within a culture that esteems the scholar, the learned. He was always straightforward. His goal was open and sincere: to write the book together.

Calligraphy soaked into my life the way ink soaks into paper. I followed Khoo's directions to the calligraphy supply stores in Singapore and asked to see the inkstones. I rubbed my fingers across their smooth coolness, the fine



Mi Fu (1051–1107)

and detailed carvings, and chose for myself a chocolate-brown one with a tiny crab carved next to the hollow for the ink. I hefted large brushes of goat hair and marveled at small ones with tiny tufts like mouse whiskers. I bought an inkstick that fit nicely in the palm of my hand and was embossed with a gold and silver dragon. I practiced grinding it against the stone, adding water and testing different dilutions on paper. I traveled to Beijing and, with my husband, sought out the stone stele carved with ancient inscriptions at the Ming Tombs and the tablets in the Temple of Confucius. I found the Liulichang district in the city where the ancient-looking shops are filled with books, brushes, scrolls, and inkstones.

In Singapore, Khoo invited David and me to an exhibition: *Masterpieces of Paintings and Calligraphy from the National Palace Museum of Taipei*. The exhibit featured not the originals, which were carefully preserved in Taipei, but precise and life-size copies made by a Japanese company using advanced photographic techniques. The reproductions were so good that some art experts exclaimed they were better than the originals marked with damage from aging and moisture.

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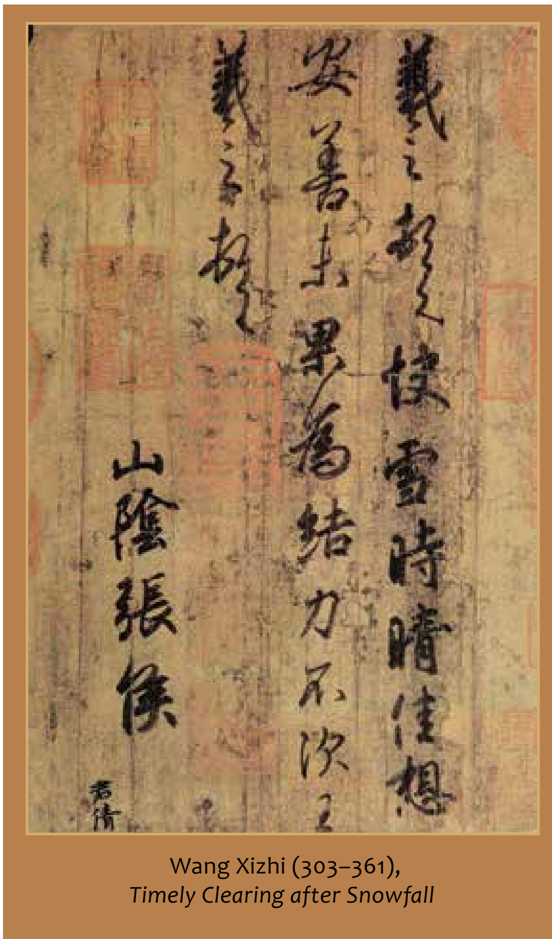

Wang Xizhi (303–361),
Timely Clearing after Snowfall

We followed Khoo from piece to piece as he described the works. He watched our faces, made sure we were keeping up with him, that we were not lost in the explanations. He led us to the works of calligraphers featured in our book. Here was a wild and crazy cursive piece of writing by Mi Fu, the one who said writing calligraphy should be like riding a horse without a bridle. There was a scroll titled *Timely Clearing after Snowfall* by Wang Xizhi of Orchid Pavilion fame. We stood before the masterworks of painters and Khoo explained the close links between painting and calligraphy, how they were born of the same source—the brushwritten line. He translated the poems that were part of the paintings, discussed the quality of the calligraphy, the placement of the artist's seals.

For David, it was his chance to sense the heat of Khoo's passion for teaching and for the arts. For me, it was a reminder of the joyful mastery that had drawn me at the beginning. David and I were so enchanted by his enthusiasm that we bought twelve prints from the exhibition shop.

After visiting the exhibit with Khoo, after seeing him in the milieu of the masters who had preceded him, I better grasped the role of calligraphy in his life. Francois Cheng described it well:

> "In the practice of this art, the calligrapher seeks to rediscover the rhythm of his deepest being, and to enter into communion with the elements." The thickness and slenderness of the brushstrokes, "…their contrasting and balancing relationships, permit him to express the multiple aspects of his own sensibility: forcefulness and tenderness, abandon and quietude, tension and harmony. In the accomplishment of the unity of each character and in the balance among them, the calligrapher, even in the act of expressing things, achieves his own unity."

Wanting to go deeper into the language, wanting to explore the rising and falling tones of the voices I heard in the streets, I signed up for a class in Mandarin, the dialect of Beijing, the acknowledged standard in Singapore for spoken Chinese. If the characters were a silent song on a scroll, then the speaking was an opera for the ear. But I fell adrift in the sounds. Even as I followed and mimicked the teacher's voice on the tonal scales, I could not find the discipline to practice much outside of class. In English-abundant Singapore there was little to push me through the difficult task of learning to speak this other language. The class ended. I returned to focus solely on the calligraphy. What captured me about the language was the art of writing, the writing about writing, the work with Khoo.

Of all the stories Khoo and I crafted together for the book, my favorite was the one about the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*. On that beautiful day in late spring in 352 CE in Shaoxing, China, on the traditional day for the ceremony of purification, the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi gathered a group of scholars, poets, calligraphers, friends, and family. They seated themselves in the Pavilion, perched where "a swirling, splashing stream, wonderfully clear" curved around "like a ribbon," as he wrote in the Preface. Seated along the stream, the guests played a drinking game where small cups made of lotus leaves were filled with wine and set to floating downstream. When a cup reached a guest, he (it was only men at the gathering) was obliged to either drain the cup or compose a poem.

As we wrote in the book, "Wang Xizhi is to Chinese calligraphy what Michelangelo is to sculpture, Beethoven to music, or Shakespeare to English literature." He was the master of his art, who was already accomplished at the surprisingly young age of seven, who had been a minister in the Jin Dynasty, who loved white geese and kept them as pets, who took inspiration from his birds, who translated the motions of their heads, necks, wings, bodies into his calligraphy, who was fifty years old when he composed the Preface to the thirty-seven poems, who was slightly tipsy with the wine when he wrote the Preface in brushstrokes that flowed so spontaneously.

Art endures. The *Orchid Pavilion Preface*—the *Lan Ting Xu*—written by Wang Xizhi more than 1600 years ago, is still revered today. Not that the original survives. What happened to it is unknown. But copies abound and they carefully imitate even the mistakes that Wang Xizhi made and crossed out.

After Khoo read the first draft of this story, which I had captured from his

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words and then smoothed and edited, he told me that my version brought tears to his eyes, so moved was he by the way I had shaped the tale. This was reward. I might not have the will to learn Mandarin, but my English words could move a master.

We finished the book. In the preface Khoo rendered the essence of our collaboration:

> Our mutual appreciation and understanding of the art of calligraphy led us to attempt to blend the values of Eastern ideology with Western thought. The writing involved transposing philosophies across cultural boundaries, generating new terminology, deliberating on the translation of ancient Chinese proverbs, and transforming scholarly concepts into popular language. Ultimately, this book reflects the important role that calligraphy plays in each of our lives.

We began to send the manuscript to publishers. My family and I made our first trip back to the US, and I was able to carry with me the identity I had composed as coauthor of a book on Chinese calligraphy. Upon our return to Singapore, sorting through the piles of mail, I found a letter; the manuscript had been accepted. Graham Brash in Singapore would publish **Behind the Brushstrokes, Tales from Chinese Calligraphy**. David and Claire hugged me and cheered at the news, while I was teary with relief and delight. Khoo had the book he had always wanted. I had a Singapore self defined by a joyful collaboration. Our writing together was a success.

Today, in Seattle, nearly twenty years later, I live surrounded by calligraphy. Scrolls written in Khoo's marvelous hand hang in our living room beside the paintings and calligraphy from the Taipei museum exhibit. On the east wall of my home office, where I see it every day, there is a framed photo with writing like strings of black pearls hanging along each side. The image is one that I took on the trip to China. I shot it from inside a lookout on the Great Wall at Badaling, not far from Beijing. Gray blocks of stone tunnel toward an arch that frames the sun-bright view outside. In the near distance is a section of the Wall, a backbone laid across the top of dry brown hills. In the far distance sits a watchtower, a small and hazy dot on a high hill. When I showed Khoo this photograph, he spotted the metaphor immediately, like a hawk spotting motion in the grass. He said he would like to write some calligraphy to accompany it and asked me to tell him about our visit. As I spoke he made a few notes, a reversal of our roles.

I ordered a print, David matted it, and we passed it to Khoo. A few days later he returned with the finished piece. Written in calligraphy on the matting was the story of our day on the Great Wall:

Artist unknown, [Calligraphers], 1870s

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> The Yellow Emperor, Huang-Ti, built the Great Wall to keep out invaders. It is the Dragon of China, the backbone stretching 10,000 li across the country. Whoever climbs the Great Wall is a true hero. And here, at Badaling, in November 1990, Nancy Penrose, her honorable husband, David, and their lovely daughter, Claire, walked proudly and confidently up the Great Wall. It was a beautiful autumn day and they enjoyed themselves greatly, even taking their lunch on the Great Wall.

Above the photo, four characters marched from right to left. Each had a long lower stroke, like a dancer's leg extended for beauty and balance. He translated for me: *Inside the Great Wall, Outside the Great Wall.*

Khoo's calligraphy around the photograph created for me a masterpiece. It is my *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, my *Lan Ting Xu*. ❀