Week 14: Poetry

Section 1: An Introduction to Calligraphy by Professor Bai Qianshen

PROFESSOR BOL: If we're going to talk about Chinese art, the place we should begin is with calligraphy, and there are few reasons for that. One is that writing is something that every literate person did every day.

And when I say writing, what I mean is taking a brush-- usually a smaller brush than this-- taking an ink stone, and taking ink-- but rarely ink this size, more likely ink around this size-- grinding it with water and the stone, holding it in your hand, dipping it into the ink, and writing. And if we think of writing that as an act that's that involved, then you can begin to see that in fact everybody every day who writes is involved in the production of art.

Now that's one reason to begin with calligraphy. Because, in fact, it reminds us that art in this sense is something that every literate person participates in. The other reason is because it has a meaningfulness at a certain level of abstraction. We assume that the way somebody walks, talks reflects their character in some sense.

And it's also true, I think, that there's an assumption in China that the way a person writes reveals something of their character. Not only in the content of what they write, but in the very way in which the ink flows through brush onto the page to form Chinese characters.

There's another aspect of this that makes calligraphy, it strikes me, very special. That is, calligraphy is meaningful, in part, because you can only do it if you've studied other people's styles. You can only do it as an artist, so to speak, as somebody who knows the styles of others.

Now today we're particularly fortunate to have a guest who'll come in and talk about calligraphy. His name is Professor Bai Qianshen, and he is both a scholar of calligraphy in Chinese history and a great calligrapher himself. Professor Bai, thank you very much for coming. And we've known each other for years now. And we've asked you today to show us something about Chinese calligraphy by doing it. Could you tell us a few things about what you're planning to do?

PROFESSOR BAI: What I'm going to do today is that I will show calligraphy in different styles, and also in different scripts. And I should clarify the two concepts. And the scripts are the writings in different forms developed in Chinese history. Chinese calligraphers use them sometimes at the same time. Some scripts no longer are used in every day, but for calligraphers, they still write it.

PROFESSOR BOL: So a person could have a style, but they could also write using different scripts.

PROFESSOR BAI: Yes.

PROFESSOR BOL: And that's what we're going to see some of that today.

PROFESSOR BAI: Yes. And also in terms of styles, before the, probably, Yuan Dynasty, and usually a calligrapher master in one particular style in one particular script. I mean, for instance, Su Shi, wrote in running script, he would have wrote in his personal style. But after Yuan Dynasty calligraphers master several styles, they learn it from other masters.
PROFESSOR BOL: So this is really a later development in Chinese history that we have people who are as versatile as you are.

PROFESSOR BAI: Yes, later history. But also in Wang Xizhi's time, a personal style may change.

PROFESSOR BOL: So this would be in the third, fourth century.

PROFESSOR BAI: Fourth century, yes. But that's a later development to that, because there were accumulation of canons. People study different canons, they master different styles.

PROFESSOR BOL: Well, let's get to business and see how it's done.

PROFESSOR BAI: OK, thank you.

Section 2: A Demonstration on the Tools for Writing

1. A Demonstration on Brush Strokes and Tip Work

PROFESSOR BAI: The different brushes can produce different results. When the brush is dry, all the hairs are separate, and they are very, very soft. But if you dip into the water or ink, you'll find that the brush -- the shape of the brush is like a cone. It's conical.

And the interesting character of a Chinese brush is that if you press more -- you give more pressure on the brush -- the stroke becomes thicker. If you lift the brush -- that means you give less pressure to the tip -- and then the stroke is thinner. So see that?

I can write -- same brush, I can write fairly thick stroke. And also, I can write a much thinner stroke. So you can see the variations. But also, when you move the brush, the tip or the tuft will rub on the surface.

If someone who is not very good at mastering this brush and then the tip, the hairs may get twisted. So if the tip is twisted, the stroke won't be very nice. So an experienced calligrapher would have to constantly adjust brush when writing. This is just like a skillful dancer will adjust his or her body accordingly when he or she is dancing.

So now I'll try to write slowly. You can see how I adjust the tip. So after I finish the characters, you will find that my hairs are not twisted, and that the brush tips are not twisted.

2. Four Treasures of Study

I would like to introduce the so-called four treasures of the study -- the main tools for calligraphy. The first tool is a brush. The Chinese calligraphy brushes are mainly made by animal hairs.

We can divide the animal hairs in two big categories. One we may call stiff tuft. The other one, we may call soft tuft. And the stiff one usually are made of hairs of a weasel.
This is a weasel's hair. Or rabbit's hair— even stiffer. And then for the soft brushes, we use mainly sheep's hair. You can see, very, very soft. But also, sheep's hair is usually longer, so for the big brush, we use the sheep's hair quite often.

So different brushes can produce different results. For smaller characters, in most cases, calligraphers would use the stiff brush. For instance, the brush of rabbit hair and the brush of weasel's hair. So I will demonstrate with the different brushes later.

The second material we use is paper. We can divide paper into two categories, too. One we may call treated paper. And so the surface is fairly glossy, and very, very smooth, and is less absorbent.

So you can write calligraphy, actually, fairly fast. Actually, before the Ming Dynasty, most papers calligraphers used, actually, were this kind of treated paper. So if you go to a museum, you can find this kind of paper of ancient masterpieces.

After the Ming Dynasty, untreated papers were often used, and produced different results. So the untreated paper, in most cases is very absorbent. Some papers are made by rattan. Some papers are made of bamboo or sometimes straw.

Probably the best material for papermaking is the sandalwood tree. So this is especially produced in Anhui Province. So calligraphers like to use this kind of paper.

So today I bring two kinds of paper. One we may call the treated, with a certain pattern printed on the surface. The other one is untreated paper— very absorbent. When I write small characters, I would write on this paper. And when I write big characters, I will write on this untreated paper.

For ink— ink cake, we call that. In ancient time, literati used ink cake to make ink. And he pours the water into the ink stone, and then grinds it. When you're grinding the ink, which is actually very time consuming, calligraphers would read the masterpiece sometimes to study ancient masterpieces if they want to copy the masterpieces.

But, actually, in 19th century, ready-made ink could be purchased in stores. And in the later 19th century, actually, some literati tried to make machines to help them to grind the ink. Because to write big characters, I would say that sometimes you will have an attendant to grind the entire day, and then to make enough ink to write a big piece of calligraphy. So it's very time consuming.

So what the materials— the Chinese ink are made— pine tree soot. They burn the pine tree and collect the soot. And then you'd group— they're put into a mold and they actually pound it, at least for 6,000 times; and sometimes, even 30,000 times. Why they need to pound so many times?

Because the density will affect the result. Otherwise, you put it in the water, it will become soft, and then you will have bubbles. We would have the small particles, and it's not very, very good. So actually, scholars paid great attention to three things, actually, among the four treasures of the study— brush, ink, and paper. In fact, brush and paper are the most important tools for writing.

For ink stones, there are two places that make good ink stones. One is in Guangdong. They called it duan ink stone. The other is Shexian in Anhui Province. They also make very good ink stones.

But an ink stone became kind of a object of appreciation. Very few literati actually participated in making ink stones. But in the Northern Song Dynasty, actually many great calligraphers were very enthusiastic in making, paper, brush, and ink cakes.
Section 3: A Demonstration of Different Scripts

1. Small Regular Script

PROFESSOR BAI: Now, I'm going to write in small regular script, which is a common script used for writing, sometimes government document, for diary, for letters to parents or sometimes for the exams. So this writing is very formal and very, very careful.

2. Cursive Script

Now, I'm going to write a Tang Dynasty poem in cursive script. The cursive script is shorthanded. We may say that. Simplify the character structure, and also many strokes joined together when writing.

Section 4: Toward a Historical Understanding of Calligraphy – The Construction and Deconstruction of Tradition

1. The Legend of Wang Xizhi: Creating a Cultural and Political Model through Calligraphy (Part-1)

REN WEI: On a very nice day in the year 353, a group of friends held a poetry contest by a stream at a place called the Orchid Pavilion. As you can imagine, drinking was normally involved in such poetry gatherings in Chinese history.

And likewise, at the Orchid Pavilion, cups of wine had been placed on leaves floating down the stream. Whenever a cup stopped in front of someone, he was required to empty it and write a poem. If he failed to come up with anything, he would be punished by having to drink three additional cups.

The gathering at the Orchid Pavilion became a popular painting subject. Here we see a Ming Dynasty painting, datable to 1560. And that's roughly 1,200 years after the actual event. It was painted by an artist named Qian Gu, depicting this historical gathering.

Cups of wine float downstream as the poets line up on both sides, drink freely, and struggle to complete their poems. Some were absorbed in composing poems. Some were reading works already written, while others are engaged in discussion.

But in reality, the gathering is not famous for the poems that were written during the day, but remembered for one particular participant. This was Wang Xizhi, then a minor government official. And he wrote the preface for the 37 poems that had been written during the day.

Inebriated and sentimental, Wang Xizhi displayed unsurpassed spontaneity and expressiveness in his brushwork of the composition, known as the Preface of the Orchid Pavilion. And Chinese children today are still required to know this preface by heart.

[CHILDREN RECITING THE PREFACE OF THE ORCHID PAVILION]
REN WEI: What Wang Xizhi wrote is a lyrical masterpiece celebrating the pleasure of life and lamenting its impermanence. Yet the popularity of his calligraphy far exceeds his lyrical composition. This piece of calligraphy that you see here was so famous and admired that it was covered by seals of well-known connoisseurs of calligraphy throughout subsequent dynasties, as well as emperor seals that indicate its imperial status.

This piece of writing became unarguably the most famous artwork in Chinese history. Now, you might wonder, there are many calligraphic works produced in Chinese history, but why did this one become the most famous? First, let's take a closer look at the work.

One reads from top to bottom and sequentially column by column from left to right. (Actually, she should have said from right to left.) A native Chinese speaker would read by retracing the execution of the writing. As we have mentioned in the calligraphy demonstration, the preface is written in the running script, or xingshu, a script that has not been popular until Wang Xizhi's time. This is around the mid-fourth century.

The location of a drinking party provided the opportunity for quick, spontaneous response to the event. Although the consciousness to appreciate writing as object of aesthetic value appeared in the Han dynasty, it was really during Wang Xizhi's time, the fourth century, that a distinct culture of calligraphy took shape. Now, let's compare it with a few earlier works of calligraphy to see how distinctive of a change Wang Xizhi's calligraphy displays.

On the left is a piece written in the archaic cursive script that still has traces of early forms of writing on bamboo slips, especially in the characters unsystematic, tilting and overall harshness of brushstrokes. The sense of compression and contraction of early forms of writing is replaced by a much more expansive structure in Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. For example, all characters have a systematic mild tilting to the left. And the whole piece seems to be written with great ease and speed, while keeping a well-balanced structure in place.

Now, if we compare the Orchid Pavilion with a clerical script, which had been the most popular script before Wang's time, we can see that Wang Xizhi really breaks away from the rigid frame and exaggerated proportion of the clerical script. For example, the same character zhi, appear in both works. There's little variations of the two zhi character in the clerical script. And you can see how the last slanting strokes of the zhi character look extremely elongated. The three zhi characters in Wang Xizhi's piece, however, were all written slightly differently from each other, and the writer was free to make the last stroke longer or shorter as he pleased.

Wang Xizhi became such a legendary figure that anecdotes associated with his life are still well circulated in China today. Here, one of the cartouches inside the Long Corridor at Summer Palace in Beijing, we see the depiction of the story telling how Wang Xizhi loved geese and would like to buy some geese from Daoist practitioner. The Daoist practitioner knew he was a famous calligrapher, so he offered to exchange his geese with Wang's calligraphy.

In reality, the original of the Orchid Pavilion and many other pieces of Wang's writings did not survive. What I have shown to you here is a tracing copy made in the eighth century. There are many other copies. Here's another one, an ink rubbing from a carved stele from the 11th century.

It might not be surprising that Wang Xizhi's calligraphy was copied over and over again in the subsequent dynasties. Perhaps similar to all famed artists in the past, Wang Xizhi's fame is not entirely due to his own talent. One emperor from the beginning of the Tang Dynasty ordered many copies of Wang Xizhi's Orchid Pavilion to be made. And he is perhaps more responsible for Wang Xizhi's everlasting popularity.
2. The Legend of Wang Xizhi: Creating a Cultural and Political Model through Calligraphy (Part-2)

REN WEI: Emperor Taizong, the second Emperor of the Tang Dynasty, is seen here depicted sitting a sedan chair, carried, and fanned by quite a few court ladies, while giving an audience to the envoys of Tibet. This painting, in fact, gives clues to the connection between Wang Xizhi, calligraphy, and the Emperor.

Although Tang Dynasty succeeded in unifying China, the culture divergence between various parts of China persisted. Especially between the North and South. The way the Emperor Taizong is portrayed here in public with many lady attendants had not been very common in the North.

Traditionally, Emperors from the North are depicted standing majestically with two male attendants at each side. For example, here Emperor Wudi from Jin Dynasty in the North is depicted in this fashion. The manner in which Emperor Taizong had chosen to have himself depicted derives from the Southern tradition of Emperor portraiture. And here you see an example of the portrait of Emperor Wendi of Southern Chen dynasty.

Prior to Tang Dynasty, the North consists of many clans of different ethnic groups, was plagued by warfare and disintegration. Whereas the South became home to many cultured families escaping from the North. Compared to the militant rulers of the North, the Southern emperors were more concerned with personal cultivation and ruling society by civil government.

Particular calligraphic styles are also associated with different cultures between the North and the South. Whereas stele were more commonly carved to preserve writings in the North. The settlers were writing on paper and silk, such as in the case of Wang Xizhi.

If we compare the character suo in a rubbing from the North, and the way Wang Xizhi writes the same character even without knowing the Chinese language one can tell that Wang Xizhi character displays a far less rigid structure, and a far more fluid brushstrokes than the ink rubbing produced in the North. While the character shu is rendered in a very austere manner with no two strokes connecting to one another in the ink rubbing. The same character is written with connecting brush strokes displaying playful undulation in Wang Xizhi's hand.

By choosing to be depicted following the Southern tradition of emperor portraiture, Emperor Taizong further claimed cultural allegiance to the South by propagating Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. He collected over 2000 pieces of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, and also personally composed the entry of Wang Xizhi's biography for the official history of the Jin Dynasty.

Wang Xizhi's elegant, fluid script and his well-educated and refined background made him and his calligraphy the cultural civil model during the Taizong reign in the Tang Dynasty. Emperor Taizong, the military conqueror of partial Turkish heritage, was perhaps in need to represent himself, and by extension his state, as civil and cultured as possible by assimilating many culture traditions from the South.

When Emperor Taizong died, he had the original Preface to the Orchid Pavilion buried with him underground.

The relationship between leadership and culture authority is crucial to statecraft throughout Chinese history. The more familiar example would be how Chairman Mao was also known for his poems and calligraphy. One of his most famous poems was incised on a large piece of rock in his own calligraphy in Hunan. Mao's calligraphic style is still very popular among current practitioners of calligraphy. However,
not because of his political association at all, but the idiosyncratic style that stands for his bold and daring personality.

Even if the Orchid Pavilion did not survive, the stories and legends around it are enough to illustrate the history of calligraphy in China. From Wang Xizhi’s inventive running script, to Wang Xizhi as a state-sponsored, orthodox style—his writing is preserved through centuries of copying. Yet it is also precisely due to this perpetual copying that the original trace of his hand is lost to us.

3. The Art of Xu Bing: The Enduring Questions of Tradition in a Global World

Calligraphy, the art of writing, played a formative role in Chinese culture where the past is treated as a source of cultural authority and legitimacy. More than painting, sculpture, or architecture, calligraphy was regarded and is perhaps still regarded as the most renovated art form in China.

The popularity of the practice of calligraphy is still very much reflected in Chinese art today. Anyone who has been to China would have witnessed elderly men writing calligraphy on the street simply using water. Despite the continuation of the traditional practice, Chinese artists today have transformed the use of calligraphy so that it can reach out to a larger worldwide audience.

Here is a work by Xu Bing, a prominent contemporary Chinese artist, who plays with Chinese characters by exploring the relationship between word and image. That is, the close relationship between the meaning of a word and its pictorial, or semi-pictorial, form.

In fact, Xu Bing is still dealing with a perpetual problem throughout the history of Chinese calligraphy. Namely, the contention between the physical presence of the writing and its meaning. Let’s walk through the working made in 2001 titled Landscript to explain this idea a little better.

Can you infer anything from the title Landscript? What is represented in this work? Xu Bing actually coined the English word Landscript to describe his landscapes of this type, in which he uses Chinese characters as pictorial elements. For example, can you make out the two houses in the center of the landscape? The elements of the houses such as the gate and the window are indicated by Chinese characters that say gate, men, and window, chuang, respectively.

They field to the left of the houses were written with many of the characters cai, meaning vegetable. Now, let’s look at how the artist Xu Bing signed his painting at the bottom right corner of the painting. Can you read it? A hint for you here. It’d be easier for you read this signature if you were an English speaker.

He wrote his name, Xu Bing, in Roman letters—an idiosyncratic style that he developed as a way to alter our perception of traditional calligraphy and its cultural particularity. They look like they could be Chinese characters, but in fact they’re written out in an alphabet using strokes that resemble those in Chinese characters. In place of a signature, Chinese artists usually put red seals on their works. Xu Bing is using the same kind of alphabet in his seal.

Section 5: Professor Alister Inglis Demonstrating Slender Gold Script

WILLIAM KIRBY: This is a very special event. It’s a day in which you can see the living culture of China in writing. And let me start by welcoming from across that enormous river, the Charles, Professor Alister
David Inglis, who is Professor of Chinese at Simmons College. He's taught at Hamilton College before that, and the University of Melbourne before that. Educated in Australia at Melbourne, also in Japan, he is really living proof of something that I will die before I-- that white guys can't learn how to write Chinese really well, which, in my experience, actually, is not true.

ALISTER INGLIS: You should wait and see.

WILLIAM KIRBY: But you want to talk a little bit about how you came to be a calligrapher?

ALISTER INGLIS: Yes. I think, even before I started to learn Chinese, I was fascinated with calligraphy on traditional Chinese paintings, and I'd sort of try to copy it, even though I didn't really know what I was copying. And then when I started learning Chinese, I thought the language would be key to understanding the culture. And I guess I surprised myself-- I was very good at it.

But at that stage, I think one of my teachers lent me a little copybook. There was no one, really, to teach me calligraphy at the time. The technical aspects, I guess I sort of started by just copying. And using my artistic background made sense as well. I almost became an artist at one stage of my life, but an interest in Chinese language and culture steered me away from that.

So basically, I learned my technique, and I suppose I taught myself. And then later I got more technical books that explained the orthodox way of posture and way to hold a brush and how to move a brush and what have you.

And then the opportunity to study in Japan, and then the chance to go to Taiwan was really good. And I was able to get copybooks from there. And then I suppose I've copied and learned various styles, from the proverbial kaishu, the block script, to the semi-cursive, cursive, and the clerical script, or the lishu.

I'd like to, at least, attempt to demonstrate something fairly rare for you today that I haven't done in public before, which is the shoujin ti, or the slender gold script, pioneered by the Song Dynasty Emperor Huizong. It might've been reasonably influential during Huizong's time, but it hasn't been as extensively copied. Emperor Zhang of the Jin Dynasty wrote in that style as well because he was related to Huizong so he tied it into a family tradition.

I don't think there'd be too many people in the world who do it because it's called slender gold script, obviously, because it's very slender and very thin-- thin brushstrokes and thin lines. So If your hand shakes a little bit or you're not too confident, that'll be readily apparent when you're looking at it. So hopefully I'll be brimming with confidence after Professor Kirby's introduction and things will go really smoothly.

WILLIAM KIRBY: Come right, come around.

ALISTER INGLIS: When I start, please feel free to come over, as long as you don't knock the cameras over. You probably need to see it once I start writing, and you can't see from way back there. This is the traditional way to grind the ink. I have the inkstone here, which is one of the four treasures of the scholar's studio, or the wen fang si bao.

Paper, of course, is another one. And the ink, very important. And perhaps most importantly, the brush. But I guess with calligraphy, the interaction between brush and the quality of the type of paper and the type of ink is pretty important. I've got my bottled ink here that, if we have time, I might demonstrate some other styles as well.

For the shoujin ti, I like to grind my own ink, which is preferable for many reasons. I suppose in our consumer society, we're so used to instant gratification that comes by just taking ink straight out of the bottle. But in traditional China, there were no shortcuts to things, and things had to be done properly.
The grinding of the ink, ideally, steadies your mind for the task at hand. You might also look at a copy of what you're about to copy and then you might take the time to see things that otherwise you wouldn't have time to see.

WILLIAM KIRBY: When you grind it, if I may ask, what is the liquid in that? Is that a traditional liquid, or a--

ALISTTER INGLIS: It's just simply water in a Sustain eye drops-- hopefully, it's not eye drops. I think it's water. But it's just convenient to have a little dropper.

The idea is just grind a little bit at a time, keep adding water. I think in the ancient days, masters of calligraphy and painting had servants and young servants to grind their ink for them. But I didn't like to ask your TAs to do that for me today.

WILLIAM KIRBY: Don't be shy.

ALISTTER INGLIS: The ink that you grind yourself is preferable also for many reasons. There's no preservative in it, so it's much better for the brushes, if you have a very good brush that you want to keep. This brush I have, I've been practicing with it all throughout the summer and it's still fairly new. It wouldn't be quite so new if I had been using bottled ink.

Also the tip of the brush is very important, because once the tip starts to go, or it starts to split, it can be very frustrating, and there's no looking back. Whereas ink that you've ground yourself, I find, compared to the bottle ink, helps the brush to keep its tip much better. Whereas, particularly with the bottled ink, and the cheaper quality bottled ink, the tip can tend to play up a little bit.

OK, so I did this a few days ago. If my hand's steady enough, I'll try and replicate it today. And then, as I said, I'll practice some other styles, if time allows. And this is an actual poem by the Song Emperor Huizong talking about a scene in the palace.

WILLIAM KIRBY: And what kind of paper are you writing on?

ALISTTER INGLIS: This one, I suppose, technically, rice paper is a catch-all phrase for it, although not all paper is made of rice. That was only really a later invention with the late imperial period. In Chinese, it's referred to as xuanzhi, after the village that was famous for paper production. But xuanzhi tends to be sort of a catch-all phrase.

This paper I got from Blick. And I like it for the shoujin ti because, depending on how much alum here is in the paper, the ink will run more or less. For this particular style, I don't really want the ink to run at all.

However, the Chinese paper's different from Western paper insomuch as it allows a certain amount of absorption of the ink into the paper. And that's very important, because if you try and do calligraphy on, maybe, copy paper, or even good-quality watercolor paper, the brush will just slide on the top and the ink won't absorb. It won't really be successful.

Ideally, I should have a nice straight back posture, both feet on the floor, using the whole force of my body here, and what have you. But because I'm so shortsighted, for this particular style I really have to focus with my naked eye, and I can't really focus that well with glasses, so I will use a fairly unorthodox posture here. The grip for the brush is fairly important as well, different from a pen.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

ALISTTER INGLIS: And so there you have it.
ALISTER INGLIS: Thank you. Not quite as good as a few days ago.

WILLIAM KIRBY: Well, I'm afraid we'll have to move on, but I think this shows you what patience, what diligence-- Do you practice every day?

ALISTER INGLIS: I don't get the time, unfortunately.

WILLIAM KIRBY: This is what happens when you're a professor.

ALISTER INGLIS: That's right, being a professor, I've got to read books and stuff like that, and teach classes. And some people expect me to go to meetings, as well.

WILLIAM KIRBY: Yeah, it's terrible. It's terrible. But it's absolutely magnificent. And thank you for presenting this. Thank you.

ALISTER INGLIS: Thank you.