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## RANDOM NOTES ON THE PRESTIGE OF "WRITING"

BY U. A. CASAL, KOBE

This is not a dissertation on the art of writing, or the composition or connotation and evolution of the Chinese ideogram. It is just an assemblage of random reflections on the more ethical (or sentimental) significance of the written character in the Far East.

It is well known that the Chinese, from a very early period, used certain symbols to express a conception. They never had an alphabet whose "letters" were strung together to express a word by sound. They began with a kind of picture-drawing for the most important objects within their sphere, and these pictograms with sundry slight modifications had to serve for indicating related thoughts. For technical reasons the pictures became more angular or linear, and to some extent "shortened"; at the same time however the evolution of thought demanded less "concrete" symbols, which were obtained by combining two or more individual pictograms to form a suggestive new one. And so, in the end, were born ideograms (or ideographs) by the tens of thousands, some of them composed of dozens of "strokes," and most of them entirely uninterpretable except to the advanced scholar. These characters, of which some two or three thousand must be learned for the slightest education, still hamper the development of China and Japan along modern lines. But their venerable age seems to guarantee their immunity ...

The fact that the Chinese ascribe the invention of their ideograms – the original pictograms – to the times of Fu Hsi, their mythological "emperor" way back in the early third millennium B. C., simply shows that they must be old beyond historical recollection. Fu Hsi is the anthropomorphized first era of civilization of that racial group, of obscure western origin, which conquered the Huang-ho basin and East to the present Shantung region, and later extended farther South, forming what we generally understand as China. Some savants insist that this

"writing" was invented a century or two later, at the time of Huang Ti, the next and most exalted of the Wu Ti, the original "Five Emperors" of China. It hardly matters. Ts'ang Chieh is the man actually credited with originating "ideograms," and traditionally he was minister to either of these emperors, perhaps even subsequently Fu Hsi's successor. It seems that one day, wandering along a beach, Ts'ang Chieh noticed a good many impressions of birds' feet in the moist sand, which suggested to him a better system of "marks" than the knotted cords and notched sticks hitherto in use.<sup>1</sup> So he combined various aspects of these impressions into 450 signs, still known as the bird-tract script, *niao-chi-wên*. At the same time, and for undisclosed reasons, he must have been observing the wriggling movements of some tadpoles, because he also invented the tadpole characters, or *k'o-tou-tzu*.<sup>2</sup> Ts'ang Chieh is said to have had four eyes—more commonly referred to as "double pupils"—always a sign of supernatural wisdom and powers. He is still venerated as a God of Writing.

A fellow-minister, Tzu Sung, helped him by studying the constellations in the heavens ... But other occult legends are introduced to account for the evolution of the final true ideogram, such as a supernatural water-horse, with curls on its back forming oracular marks, and a divine tortoise, with some "scroll of writing" on its carapace. These signs were duly interpreted by sage and philosophic men, who thus deciphered moral teachings and "the secret of the unseen." All of which only shows the mysteriousness and mysticism of some weird marks which had a definite meaning to the initiated, but to them alone.

The oldest use of primitive ideograms was probably religious, that is magical, oracular, being scratched into bones and lengths of bamboo.

1. The Chinese and probably Japanese used cords into which knots were made as marks, perhaps also with fringe-like coloured strings attached, similar to the well-known Peruvian *quipus*. They were used for sundry notations and records.

2. Richard Wilhelm (in *Kungfutse: Gespräche*) is of opinion that since the ancient oracle-bone characters do not in the least suggest tadpoles, the term may originally not have applied to any Chinese writing, but to some cuneiform script which perchance came to China. The deduction seems sound.

The idea may well have originated 4000 years ago. So-called oracle-bones have been unearthed in immense numbers, and such of about the year 1300 B.C. already show a distinctly ideographic writing, not simply "pictures." If the range of the "vocabulary" is not yet very extensive or subtle, the signs nevertheless bespeak a century-long development. Records of unusual happenings may have followed, or memoranda for important verbal messages, commands to officials, and so forth. From the beginning, writing seems to have had a sort of sacred character, and this has been retained to our day, even after the writing material became more perishable. The Chinese were taught that those who do not respect written paper are as evil as those who deposit filth near a sanctuary, or scrape the gilding from a holy image! They would be condemned to eternal pains in the sixth of the ten hells, where in sixteen different chambers the most horrid punishments will await them ...<sup>3</sup>

And yet, even the Chinese savants admit that the invention of writing was not an unmixed blessing ... On this "crisis," when a medium for conveying and giving permanency to ideas was formed, "the heavens, the earth, and the gods, were all agitated. The inhabitants of hades wept at night; and the heavens, as an expression of joy, rained down ripe grain." The influence of this new medium on the growth of civilization was immense. "From the invention of writing, polite intercourse and music proceeded; reason and justice were made manifest; the relations of social life were illustrated, and laws became fixed. Governors had laws to which they might refer; scholars had authorities to venerate; and hence, the heavens, delighted, rained down ripe grain. The classical scholar, the historian, the mathematician, and the astrologer can none of them do without writing; were there no written language to afford proof of passing events, the shades might weep at noonday, and the

3. Buddhism knows numerous hells, hot and cold, each with sundry "courts" or "chambers", where the souls, in their human shapes, undergo ghoulis punishments for the sins committed in this life. The stage in hell is however not everlasting; hell is rather like a purgatory from which the soul emerges for re-incarnation.



heavens rain down blood." But, the wise man also admits, "From the invention of writing, the machinations of the human heart began to operate; stories false and erroneous daily increased, litigations and imprisonments sprang up; hence also, specious and artful language, which causes so much confusion in the world. It was for these reasons that the shades of the departed wept at night." Indeed, the Japanese, probably basing themselves on this ancient Chinese opinion, still say that *ji wo shiru wa urei no hajime*, "a knowledge of writing is the beginning of sorrows ..." – Of Laotse, nominally 6th century B. C., it is already said that when once praising the primitive ways of the forbears, he recommended: "Let the people again knot cords and use them instead of writing." ...<sup>4</sup>

As regards Japan, the *Nihongi* Chronicles (of the year 720) mention under date of the second month of A. D. 285 that "Wang-in arrived, and straightway the Heir Apparent, Uji no Waka-iratsuko, took him as teacher, and learnt various books from him. There was none which he did not thoroughly understand. Therefore the man called Wang-in was the first ancestor of the Fumi no Obito," i. e. the Chiefs of Writing. However, while we can hardly believe that the Japanese had never before become superficially acquainted with Chinese writing, this arrival of a qualified Korean teacher of letters probably occurred a good hundred years later.<sup>5</sup> Thus it came that at a comparatively late epoch of their

4. *Tao-te-ching*, Chapt. 80. Laotse may actually have lived around the year 300 B. C.

5. Most early dates of Japanese "history" must be "moved up" in decreasing ratio, so that some occurrences ascribed to the 7th century B. C. come to about the 1st century B. C., those of say the 1st to about the 3rd century, until with about the 5th century A. C. we reach more reliable dates. Aston, translator of the *Nihongi*, in respect to the above passage has the following to say:

"There are clear indications that the Chinese language and character were not wholly unknown in Japan from a time which may be roughly put as coinciding with the Christian epoch. But this knowledge was probably confined to a few interpreters. There were no schools, and no official records. The arrival of Wangin was therefore a most important event in Japanese history. It was the beginning of a training in Chinese ideas which has exercised a profound influence on the whole current of Japanese thought and civilization up to our own day.

The date given in the 'Nihongi,' however, cannot be correct ... Wangin's arrival must be placed 120 years later, i. e. in 405 instead of in 285."

evolution, the Japanese (like the Koreans before them) did but adopt the Chinese method of symbol-writing. There can hardly be a doubt – even if certain Japanese scholars insist on the contrary – that Japan never had an earlier script of her own, whether phonetic or otherwise; knots and notches must have been used as memoranda, etc., as seems to have been the case all over the primitive world.<sup>6</sup>

It can hardly be denied that the peculiarity of the Chinese characters prevented a more international development of Eastern Asia. China, the teacher, with Korea and Japan as faithful pupils, formed a cohesive but isolated group, which outside nations could rarely penetrate, while they in turn hardly bothered to understand the so different linguistic methods of the rest of the world. However, we need not enlarge on this.

For many generations not only the teaching but the use itself of Chinese writing (and other arts) practically remained in the sole possession of Chinese and Korean immigrants, who held corresponding Court appointments. Progress in learning among the Japanese was very slow. But with the so-called *Heian-chô* period, say throughout the 9th and 10th centuries, we reach a civilization era in which calligraphy was made quite a cult, at least in the higher circles. “Beauty of penmanship counted as much or more than beauty of person,” and much more than true worth of character. Calligraphy was considered a virtue rather than a talent. Women fell in love with a man’s writing, and *viceversa*; and no love affair began without a preliminary exchange of well-turned and well-penned sonnets. The old romances are full of extensive references to this custom, and criticisms of penmanship. To some extent we may well suspect that graphology, which later played such an important role in Chinese character-reading and prognostication, had by then already reached an advanced stage. The Orientals are not only very impression-

6. Historical happenings and so forth were also stored in the memory of the *katari*, specially trained men and women who formed a guild (*katari-be*). It is from their stored memories that the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* were written early in the 8th century, with all the details and family connections going back to the age of the gods!

able, they are also emotional in their expressions. An ugly handwriting, perhaps on an inappropriately chosen sheet of paper, became so unattractive as to stifle any sympathetic feeling from the start. Love in those days was highly sentimental, and a nice sonnet beautifully written on attractively coloured and perfumed paper could easily capture a delicately attuned heart ...

At the same time the Japanese found the Chinese ideograms insufficiently flexible – if not also too difficult for the average educated man and woman – to be simply applied to their own more agglutinative, inflective language. For a long time the Chinese ideograms were used mixed, as either representing the corresponding "word," or also only a specific "sound."<sup>7</sup> Since the latter were based on the Chinese monosyllabic language, there was an enormous choice of graphs. Hence the almost unsurmountable difficulty in now interpreting these so-called *Manyô-ji* writings. For some such reason, in about the middle of the 8th century already, the great scholar Kibi Makibi (or Kibi no Mabi) invented a syllabary by taking easy portions of the Chinese *kanji* ideograms, for their sound only. Each such sign represents one of the vowels, a consonant-plus-vowel syllable, or the lone consonant "n," in accordance with the construction of the polysyllabic Japanese language. With these forty-seven *katakana* signs and some diacritical "softening" or "hardening" marks, not only grammatical endings and other mutations could be indicated, but it became possible to write the Japanese language in a purely phonetic way. The *katakana* however is a "stiff" writing, and therefore the even more famous bonze, Kōbō Daishi – again according to tradition – early in the 9th century invented a modified, more fluid *hiragana*. This, with sundry more stenographic variations – the "grass characters," the cursive *sōsho* and the half-cursive *gyōsho*, etc. – became the favourite medium of the court-ladies, and there can be no doubt that Japanese *belles lettres*, which originated among these ladies and for

7. This confusing and rather clumsy method has been compared with the writing of mediaeval Persian in Hebrew lettering, the so-called *Pahlavī*.

long remained their exclusive province, were greatly promoted by this simpler method of writing everything in syllables.<sup>8</sup>

Without going further into the intricacies of the ideogram or "Chinese character," we can fully agree with the feelings of the Spanish Franciscan, Oyanguren, who in his Japanese grammar, printed in Mexico in 1738, asserted that the Japanese (or rather Chinese) writing was "an invention of the devil to hamper the work of Christian missionaries" ...

We may wonder, nevertheless, why the Japanese, who had devised a syllabary fully competent to reproduce the Japanese language some 1200 years ago, still continued, and continue, to use these involved "logograms." The contention that it is impossible to correctly represent a word's meaning by sound only, because of so many identical sounds with different meanings, is hardly rational in a polysyllabic language: the same feature is found in the speech of most races, and usually the context makes clear what one intends to say. In ambiguous cases some qualification amply suffices.

On the other hand, in the Orient there has always been a strong opposition to the simplification of writing on the part of scholars. Their social status, their very living, depended on their book-knowledge, their knowledge of ideograms. This contention may seem absurd; yet we must not overlook that ever since the introduction of Chinese civilization, and in accordance with Chinese precedent, in Japan too, it was the scholar, the literatus, who because of his esoteric erudition actually guided the decision of rulers and the destinies of the people. The "sage" was the advisor, the minister. Scholastic acquirements have always been most deeply venerated both in China and Japan; the written character, as we saw, was something magically sacred, and its "possession" therefore gave the man a supernatural wisdom. It was logically in the interest of the scholars to keep the knowledge of letters within their group, as

8. At times *katakana* and *hiragana* are used jointly, comparable in a way to our mixing Latin and Gothic types. Transliterations, whether of foreign words or difficult native ones, are always in *katakana*; current text more often in *hiragana*.



a sort of monopoly. If book-learning became too easy, their prestige and emoluments might well go. Hence while romances, diaries, even poems were written in some *kana*, for the entertainment of the masses, all the "scientific" books – on warfare, economics, philosophy, history – were exclusively written in Chinese ideograms, the domain of savants.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately for China and Japan, the knowledge of letters was not restricted to a "guild" or caste, as was the case with practically every other profession or business. "Study" had always been open to all classes in China, and many a poor but clever lad succeeded in passing one examination after the other, ending as a famous magistrate, or even as a divinity after his death. Talent was paramount.<sup>10</sup> In Japan conditions

9. The inordinate pride of the Chinese scholar of ancient days provoked the wise Chuang Tzu, of the 4th and 3rd century B. C., to the remark: "They (the scholars) wear a round cap to announce that they know the things of Heaven, square shoes to show that they know the things of Earth, many sonorous pendants to show that they can cause Harmony everywhere ... Forsooth! The real sage knows these things without wearing the costume!"

In Japan there was only one strong scholarly voice against the Chinese characters, that of Kamo Mabuchi (1697–1769), the fighter for a revival of a true Japanese spirit and the Shintō worship. He insisted that it was wrong, altogether, to constantly imitate the manners of that "troublesome, evil, turbulent country, China". Particularly also did he consider the ideograms "a nuisance, a waste of effort, and a bother ..." "Every place name and plant name has a separate character" which is useless for anything else, yet which should be learned. How different with other countries! "In India ... fifty letters suffice for the writing of more than 5,000 volumes of the Buddhist scriptures," and permit one "to know and transmit innumerable words of past and present alike." In Holland, he understands, they even use but twenty-five letters. With the Chinese system, "sometimes people miswrite characters, sometimes the characters themselves change from one generation to the other." "The opinion that the characters are precious is not worth discussing further." – His judgement, unfortunately, did not prevail.

The number of ideograms taught in Japanese schools had to be reduced considerably from time to time, and now just suffices to read an easily written newspaper. Scientific books are still the domain of the "*sensei*," scholars, savants.

10. The famous Han-lin academy was founded by Emperor Hsüang-tsung, 713–756. Confucius, a good millennium earlier, already was a "teacher" with numerous pupils whose main studies were literary-philosophical.

Students who did not succeed in the higher examinations needed for the post of magistrate became "doctors" or fortune-tellers; those not enterprising enough for these professions earned a meagre living by painting fans and other cheap pictures, illustrating books, or writing fancy scrolls to be hung in the home for a good augury. Others might write business and private letters and read such to their customers, or keep accounts for a trader. But few who had acquired a certain knowledge of writing ever went back to the occupation of their fathers.

were somewhat different, at least until the late feudal ages, because of a less advanced social organization and the economic impossibility for a commoner to spend money on studies. The examination system was never introduced, and the only practical way open to him was the Buddhist priesthood, in which many a humble boy indeed reached great scholarly heights. While wealth, tradition, inheritance of gifts, favoured certain families (like the Fujiwara, who between A. D. 800 and 1600 produced innumerable famous scholars and poets), "new blood" came in regularly, and prevented too great a stagnation of philosophy, religion, science. It is remarkable that with the Restoration of 1868 it was not the highest *daimyô* and officials who became the leaders of the new nation, but comparatively obscure lesser *samurai*, who had prepared themselves through the study of Chinese philosophy and European socio-economic sciences.

The "esotericism" of learning at a very early period created a sort of veneration, amounting to superstitious awe, for the ideogram. The "character" became indeed not only the *symbolon* of an idea but its *idolon*. On innumerable Buddhist objects, for instance, a single (Sanskrit) "ideogram" will stand for a Buddha or his teaching: it is as good as, and perhaps more venerable, because more occult, than any anthropomorphized picture. The same feeling of reverence was transferred to writing of any kind. In China, no paper bearing characters was ever thrown away or negligently used: there were even special furnaces in many places, where such papers could be "immolated." Elsewhere there might be a box hung to the wall of a house, with the inscription: "Respect written paper and treat it with care!" Scraps of written or printed paper could be deposited therein, and would later be burnt in the special oven by the caretaker ... It is said that the general prohibition to again use paper with writing on it originated with Buddhism: the writing might well be some holy text, some saying of a wise man, illegible to the finder. Any discreditable use would be desecration. The Confucianists eagerly followed this reasoning, and in the end Governors even promulgated laws ordering the systematic collecting and burning of all written or printed



paper. In Japan the reverence was somewhat less pronounced, yet written paper retained something akin to sacredness.<sup>11</sup>

Before sitting down to write anything of importance, the Chinese and Japanese scholar would "purify his mind" by concentration, the burning of incense, perhaps even the playing of some classical music on a classical string-instrument. The act of writing was like a ritual undertaking; the ideograms would so to say remain as a permanent embodiment of one's inspiration ...

The ideogram itself is mysteriously animated, and may even become alive. There is a well-known Chinese story as to how a sage once wrote the characters for "Dragon" and "Tortoise" for an innkeeper, perhaps to square the bill which he had incurred. (We shall see that such writings are valuable.) The innkeeper displayed them over the entrance-door, like a sign-board. Not much later a disastrous fire destroyed the entire neighbourhood; but the inn remained untouched as if by magic. The magic ideograms, indeed, representing powerful "water-animals", the watery Element, in a way, had beaten back the flames! The Japanese attribute a similarly marvellous happening to their great Buddhist Saint, Kōbō Daishi (inventor of the *hiragana*). Sitting one day on the banks of a stream, he was joined by a boy who asked him to please write some character for him. Since Kōbō Daishi had no paper, he playfully outlined the ideogram for "dragon" on the water, purposely omitting one dot. The boy then added this dot, whereupon the ideogram miraculously became alive and, transforming itself into a real dragon, flew to the clouds. (Since that day, it is said, there is always a vapour over the stream ...) <sup>12</sup>

11. In modern Japan nobody dared to use a newspaper for a wrapper if it happened to bear the photograph of any member of the imperial family ...

12. There are other similar stories here and there. Kōbō Daishi's magical powers of writing are also "vouched for" by the following legend applying to his visit to China in 804 to 806: The emperor one day asked him to renew the inscription over one of the palace doors. Kōbō Daishi took five brushes – one in each hand, one with each foot, and one in the mouth. With simultaneous strokes he inscribed the desired characters, in exquisite delineation ... Then from a distance he spattered India-ink over the walls, where the drops alighted in the form of further beautiful characters!

It is not to be wondered at, then, that written characters may become excellent talismans, and even powerful conjuring spirits. Sometimes the ideograms are so stretched and distorted as to form a sort of cabalistic design, for additional protection.<sup>13</sup> Among the Chinese amulets of good luck (adopted by the Japanese to a great extent) probably none are more numerous than the ideograms for Fortune, Honour, Emolument, Longevity, Joy, in every imaginable style and on every imaginable object. Their constant visible presence in the home – painted, embroidered, carved, inlaid, on bronzes and porcelains and any possible piece of furniture – is bound to have a corresponding “favourable emanation” and influence. It is like a sort of hyperphysical Coué therapy ... Inversely, of course, ideograms of evil significance may be used as powerful agents for revenge, black magic, the invocation of nefarious effluents to do harm to one’s enemy. Many temple amulets are but slips of paper with some cryptic characters, not even forming a real text. Most of them will be stuck on a pillar or wall of the home; many will be carried on one’s person; but some must also be burnt, or chewed and swallowed, to obtain the desired effect. Characters may be inscribed on a child’s forehead (for an example, “dog,” as a guardian!), or on an adult’s body, whether with sacred vermilion or ochre or, during some eras, tattooed for permanence. Even illness may be cured in this way.<sup>13a</sup> The “power” of an ideogram lies in the fact that it embodies the power of the conception expressed, and the combination of certain such symbols may thus produce the influence desired ...<sup>13b</sup> The Taoist magician would be helpless

13. Like Chinese and Japanese, the Arabs too know the use of calligraphy to compose auspicious drawings, chiefly using the religious apostrophe “*Bismillah*” with which to outline birds, fishes or quadrupeds, etc. We in the West have mainly used similar alphabetic drawings for a joke.

13a. With the Mohammedans, mainly, the power of the written character is such that water in which the holy text written on a charm has been washed off is excellent “medicine” for all kinds of complaints ...

13b. “Modern Egyptians,” E. W. Lane told us less than a century ago, “cure sickness by writing a passage from the Koran on the inside of an earthen bowl” or cup; water is then poured into it and stirred until the writing is dissolved again, and the patient drinks this as medicine. Possibly a similar ancient belief underlies the many tea-cups and wine-cups of China and Japan, nowadays made of porcelain, whose inside is “ornamented” with a long auspicious

without his written orders to spirits, duly stamped with a crimson seal. The Japanese augur, like his Chinese *confrere*, will predict the future from certain ideograms or book-passages, just as do our bibliomancers by the Testament text which happens to be struck. Ideograms which have a personal relation to the petitioner may be occultly "dissected" by the diviner, and much misery can be avoided, for instance, when it is realized that one's name is inauspicious because written with a number of strokes that clashes with numbers involved in one's birth-horoscope. A change in name or choice of different graphs for the same sound will make one fortunate, because no longer oppressed by the incubus of the nefarious signs ...

The magic influence of the written character may also come to the fore in other ways. In Japan, for instance, the 77th and 88th birthdays are particularly feted: not because of the great age itself, however; of old, the 70th, 80th and especially 90th year were the most important ones because of their rarity. It is the "dissection" of the ideograph which counts. Seventy-seven is written as 7-10-7, and in a different arrangement these three signs form the ideogram *ki*, joy ... Hence the seventy-seventh birthday is known as the *ki-no-yuwai* (celebration). The signs for 8-10-8, in turn, differently combined form the ideograph for *kome*, or *yone*, rice, the most valued grain of Japan; and the eighty-eighth birthday thus becomes the *yone-no-yuwai* ...

In turn all these occult influences decide the colour of the ink used for writing. A pale, greyish *sumi*-ink is always of weak character, therefore inauspicious. People are very careful to use a full black, except when a death has to be announced, when the greyish tint is appropriate. (This, in our days, applies even to printing!) For very glad tidings, the Chinese use red ink, which the Japanese never did.<sup>14</sup> Red "punctuation marks" of sorts are also good for eye-trouble ... Holy texts were often written in gold on a dark-blue ground. A difference is also made between text in minute characters. The inscribing itself is of course a *tour-de-force*; but no doubt the text should also favourably influence the drink.

14. Apart from this there are distinct changes in the formation of sentences, those for ill news being practically "in reverse" of those for glad tidings.

red and black seals (though in Japan nowadays all seals are commonly in vermilion, which was formerly forbidden to the commoners), and the seals themselves, of course, consist in a number of ideograms, whether representing one's name or a sort of *nom-de-plume*. Most often the seal-inscriptions are in some antique style – actually known as “seal characters” – generally illegible to the common man; and sometimes the characters are so archaic that they need a particular study. But all that simply makes them more venerable, sanctified ... Emblematic shapes of the seal may further support the inscription.<sup>15</sup>

The seal, we may add in passing, is as good as or better than some hand-writing, in most cases. Magical seals with some sacred sentence or the name of a deity are most powerful talismans, whether stamped on a piece of paper or on any of one's personal belongings presented for the imprint. “A charm without a seal,” says an old Taoist writer, “is like an army without a general.” Formerly Chinese pilgrims carried special protective seals which they would impress in the soil of the road, “to ward off tiger and wolf,” or even evil mountain-spirits. The seal barred their way ... And when one had to cross a river, one took a lump of clay and imprinted the seal on it, then throwing the lump into the water. That subdued the very dangerous water-goblins. Superstition in China goes so far that the seal-impression may be torn off some official proclamation, to be applied on a wound, or sore, or ulcer: the official seal denotes the power to command, and therefore “must have” the power to make the disease disappear ... In fact, of course, it is the power of the written character which does all these things.

Wherever a system of writing was invented, it was evidently more venerated, of old, than it is nowadays with its greater spread. Hand-

15. As a rule the inscription is “positive,” *yang* (Japanese *yô*), that is, in relief. But sometimes “negative,” *yin* (Japanese *in*) characters are used, that is, cut into the seal's surface. One impression produces red characters, the other blank ones in a red patch. Every Chinese official, from emperor to least magistrate, had his “seal of office” for the past two thousand years or more, and in Japan the custom was introduced in about the 5th century. The seal denotes “authority.”

writing, both East and West, is believed to express the character of the writer more surely than do his acts or appearance. The Japanese have a saying that the art of writing is not just a technical acquirement, but is the expression of one's heart. We felt similarly, of old. Hence the vogue of graphology in the West, which for many more centuries past has existed in the East. It is because part of a man's character is infused in his script that autographs by famous people are so much esteemed. Our collectors may think that they simply are the lucky possessors of some paper written on by a prominent historical personage, something "rare" therefore valuable. This is a sort of mercantile attitude, pride of proprietorship without (or with very little) ethical value, but I would say of comparatively recent development. Our ancestors' outlook was more occult, hence the great collections of manuscripts – most often of no historical value – in monasteries and institutes of learning. They were treasured as memorials. Our own forbears of two and three generations ago would never have thrown away a letter: it was a respected "embodiment" of some dear or esteemed person, and as such was kept as a treasure. The Oriental still looks at autographs with such oldfashioned eyes: to him a manuscript is imbued with the author's personality, and any disrespect shown to the manuscript is a reflex disrespect shown to its author. The learned Ryozan long ago said, "I was told that I should remember that whatever I set down in writing would remain. When I write even a brief note, I should remember so to write as if it were going to be framed and hung up for all to see. He who writes carelessly writes to his own shame."

But more even than to messages, I would say, respect is paid to "inscriptions" of some auspicious sentiment, written on purpose in large ideograms, often on silk. These are mounted as *kakemono* or framed as *gaku*, and valued higher even than paintings.<sup>16</sup> Even insignificant mem-

16. Ancient Arabic records eulogically enumerate many famous calligraphists, but hardly mention painters, who were considered inferior artists. The attitude in early China and Japan was somewhat similar, with exceptions.



oranda, jottings, catalogues, if written by high or scholarly personages, may be displayed as *kakemono* or on screens. The ideograms need not be perfectly composed from what we would consider a calligraphic standpoint, although calligraphists always enjoyed a superior reputation. Like our own handwriting, the oriental characters have their individual variants; and more than our alphabetic signs are ideograms subject to "abbreviations," which often make them practically illegible. But the ideograms of a man of character will undoubtedly show some pregnant features, and it is these, corresponding to his personality, which are so admired. Under certain circumstances they may command collectors' prices even during the author's life-time, as was the case with General Nogi's autographs after the Russian war. Tradition has it that Emperor Go-Nara (A. D. 1527-1557), sorely neglected financially by the Ashikaga *shôgun*, earned his living by writing *gaku* inscriptions or copying classical texts; and so did many a nobleman before and after him, when in financial straits. — Apart from the writer's "power" transmitted to the inscription, each ideogram itself, and the maxim or wish expressed by them in the "picture," will of course exert some further beneficent, amuletic control.

As already said, calligraphists, that is men with a particularly well balanced and impressive or "spiritual" writing, were always and still are admired in the Far East. Our own approbation of a "good hand" was also greater before the invention of the typewriter ...<sup>17</sup> Since the Japanese, more even than the Chinese, believe with the Germans that "*aller guten Dinge sind drei*," there were in each major era three renowned calligraphists, the so-called *Sampitsu*, Three Brushes.<sup>18</sup>

17. Lessons in calligraphy were still obligatory in many continental high-schools fifty years ago. "Petrarch's handwriting has been reproduced as our Italic type; Porson's style of Greek letters became standard." To-day we have begun to lay stress on clean and agreeable type in printing.

18. The first ones were Kôbô Daishi, Emperor Saga, and Tachibana no Hayanari (a nobleman), early in the 9th century. They have remained the most famous ones, but other trinities exist. In the 10th century the three best had "pen-names" which ended in *seki*, and they were therefore known as the *Sanseki*: Ono no Michikaze (or *Yaseki*), Fujiwara no Yukinari (or *Gon-*



For many centuries, indeed, gentle accomplishments were more important at Court and for the attainment of honours and position than serious knowledge, ethics, or right conduct. Noblemen and noblewomen were expected to know how to dress correctly, how to posture-dance, be adept at boating and horse-riding, distinguish the scents of incense. But above all, the courtiers had to know how to produce an agreeable short poem, and usually it was less the sentiment expressed (often enough stereotypical) than the calligraphy which caused admiration or comment. The writing was always criticized, and declared superb, fine, interesting, common, even inferior. And that judgement also classified the writer as a superior or insufficiently educated person. The one was acclaimed and sought after, the other neglected and left to his shame ...

The "exercise" of writing, at the same time, to this day is looked upon as a serious medium to fortify one's character through concentration and the command over one's movements, and concurrently as a mental and psychical assuagement. Many people practise the art of writing until the end of their days, as a sort of occult pastime.

As is well known, the Chinese and Japanese never wrote with a "pen" (which word comes from *penna*, feather, the original quill). We noted that the oldest written symbols were engraved on bones or into the siliceous cuticle of bamboo, with some sharp instrument; originally perhaps a tooth or flint, later on knife or burin. Various large leaves may also have been used, and afterwards broad slivers of the woody portion of bamboo, the "tablets." It has been assumed that the vertical method of writing in China is due to the distinct vertical grain of the bamboo automatically suggesting such a mode. The bamboo-slip was held upright in the left hand, which in turn seems the logical position. The originally

*seki*, greatest of his time), and Fujiwara no Sari (or *Saseki*). In the 11th century there were three famous penmen whose names happened to end in *-fusa*, pronounced as *bô* in Sinico-Japanese, wherefore they became known as the *Sambô*: Ōe Tadafusa, Fujiwara Korefusa, and Fujiwara Nagafusa. And so on, throughout history.

“indicated” downward trend was naturally retained when other materials were introduced.<sup>19</sup> The esotericism of later scholars could of course not accept such a simple explanation, and according to them the Chinese writing is vertical because “writing ought to be a true representation of man’s thought, and man naturally stands erect”!

There may quite possibly have been intermediate methods even between the “bamboo books” and writing on paper, but we are not concerned with the development of writing. Writing on silk-weaves probably considerably antedates that on paper, and very ancient chiselled inscriptions on stone-monuments have been found. It is said, for instance, that as late as A. D. 175 the official in charge of Government Documents ordered that the Six Canonical Books be engraved on large stone-slabs which he erected before the Academy, so that students might correct their own copies after them. He had noted numerous errors in their manuscripts due to continuous re-copying, and these stone-inscriptions should serve as standards. They had an interesting sequel. Some ingenious fellow conceived the idea of sticking a large sheet of moist paper over the slab, tamping it down into every depression with a “brush.” When the paper had properly dried, it was patted with an ink-dampened pad, thus obtaining a “negative print,” white in black. We still use such so-called “rubblings” or “ink-squeezes” (*Abklatsch*) for facsimile reproductions of inscriptions, in a scientific way; but the Chinese acquire them as valuable amulets, mount them, and hang them up in their homes. They embody “antiquity” and “wisdom,” and sundry other favourable properties ... In a way, such rubblings entirely correspond to seal-impressions, and to printing in reverse, or *yin* character.<sup>20</sup>

19. With us too, in spite of our horizontal method, the downward strokes are the more important ones, the sidewise ones being more or less but junctions.

20. *Yang* is everything positive, strong, male, bright, active, etc.; *yin* everything negative, weak, feminine, dark, passive, etc. These two forces pervade the universe and everything can be classed as one or the other. The two powers, however, are usually not permanent, and according to circumstances *yang* may become *yin* and *viceversa*.

It seems worth-while mentioning that inscriptions on stones, whether memorial or amuletic (of which there are many), as well as the carved wood tablets which hang over entrances to temples, public buildings, schools and so forth, are always written by a very famous man. His writing may be done on the material itself, but more often is put on paper, the paper being then glued onto the material, so that stone-mason or wood-carver can exactly follow the ideogram's outline. Even authors will ask some prominent man to write the title of their book, which will then be faithfully reproduced in xylography.

Tradition has it that writing with a brush goes back to about the year 200 B. C., and brush-writing in ink on some absorbent sheet has been the current method in China since about that time, while Japan never knew anything else. The invention of paper followed a few centuries later, and "ever since" the Four Treasures of the Chinese scholar have been the ink-stone, the ink-cake, the brush, and the paper. They are the four precious implements, the four invaluable gems, of the studio. They stand for the very high respect which was always paid to writing, which itself meant scholarship, advancement, power. They are the pride of student and savant, and occupy the most honoured place in his study, humble as it may be.

Very possibly the precursor of the true brush, or hair-pencil, the *fude* of the Japanese, was a length of reed whose end had been crushed into fibres. These or similar substitutes may still be used at a pinch, or for some freak writing and drawing.<sup>21</sup> According to legend, a general of the Ch'in dynasty, Mêng T'ien (who died in 209 B. C.), then invented the method of inserting animal hair into a thin bamboo tube – still the most common *fude* of both China and Japan; and although others exist, the

21. The ultra-reactionary Japanese nationalist, Toyama Mitsuru, is said to have written his "soul-stirring" inscriptions with bunches of bamboo-grass, the four corners of the paper being held down by two *sumo* wrestlers. Their hands, smeared with ink, were then also "stamped" on it for added power! Hokusai once used a broom for some gigantic picture. – The Japanese house-carpenter still uses a slice of bamboo, repeatedly slit at the flattened end, with which to draw inked lines on posts and planks.

principle is always the same. Mêng T'ien could but become the Patron-saint of the brush-makers.<sup>22</sup>

Of course sundry superstitions must attach to the implement able to form ideograms,<sup>23</sup> and the brush was therefore always treated with respect, having its own finely wrought rest to lean on, or upright receptacle in which to stand, point upward. The Chinese were more attracted by this upright method than the Japanese, and some of their antique "brush-holders" are marvels of the potter's or stone-cutter's art. When a brush was worn out, the Japanese scholar – evidently in imitation of his Chinese colleague – respectfully placed it on a *fude-tsuka*, a brush-mound where in due course it would be ceremoniously buried. This reverence will ensure that perfection in the art of calligraphy which one so devoutly solicits ... Once or twice a year there may then even be a Buddhist mass for the repose of the "souls" of these brushes ...<sup>24</sup>

Usually even the common bamboo *fude*, and without exception the ceremonial or complimentary *fude* made of some more valuable and more decorative material, has a "cap" to cover the hairs, simply pressed down for a bit over the stem.<sup>25</sup> Calligraphists and painters very much dislike having anybody else use their brushes, which they consider as very personal instruments, in a way corresponding to an art-imbued extension of their arm and hand.

The brush not only absorbs part of the owner's character, but quite obviously also part of the many ideograms which it has written. Magical

22. He is said to have been the general in command at the building of the Great Wall (against the barbarians of the North), but I have seen no legend as to how or why he had this inspiration of making a hair-pencil.

23. The hair itself is selected for qualities of softness or stiffness conforming to the needs, and so is the thickness of the bamboo-holder. Yet superstition will nevertheless also attach to the brush according to the "power" of the animal whose hairs have been taken!

24. Similar *requiems* are held for broken needles, attended by women who hope to become good at sewing *kimono*; for dolls which the girls have broken; for porcelain rice-bowls which have "lost their life" in the service of the family, and what not. All these utensils are "animated" by a spirit of usefulness, and should be thanked for their help when their span of existence has been cut short!

25. Surely the predecessor of our "fountain-pen" style except for the thread ...

influence is always contagious. Therefore, when writing amulets a new brush should always be used, so that no mischievous influence might unwittingly enter. Similarly, the water used for making the ink should be quite pure, dew collected in the morning being best. On the other hand, writing with the brush which belongs to a scholar or some mighty official will always greatly enhance the effect of the ideograms. Scholars and calligraphists may be presented with large and elaborate brushes for certain inscriptions, with carved lacquer or inlaid or cloisonné handles and choice hair. These will commonly be kept as valuable mementoes.<sup>26</sup> The enormous brush with which "the eyes were opened" at the inauguration of the gigantic *Daibutsu* bronze-statue (*Vairocana* Buddha) at Nara in A. D. 752 is still kept as one of the treasures of that memorable occasion.

At an early date brush-ideograms were probably written on silk or hemp or other similar cloths, just as these materials are used to our day for religious and secular paintings. Sizing may soon have been thought of. The Chinese and Japanese apparently never wrote on true parchment, prepared animal skins, even if painted, that is, patterned, soft skins were later used for many purposes; but a sort of paper made from silk waste in lengths suitable for writing, and already then rolled, seems to have been known as early as the second century B. C. Then, around the year 105 of our era, the *Han* statesman Ts'ai Lun (died A. D. 118 or 144, also referred to as Marquis Tsao, and again described as the chief eunuch of the emperor Ho Ti of the Eastern *Han*), invented the process of making true paper from the inner bark of trees, ends of hemp, old rags and torn nets, anything with a suitable dissolvable fibre. The invention of this much cheaper substitute naturally greatly stimulated literature and the sciences, both in regard to manuscripts and because it now permitted the printing of numerous books.<sup>27</sup> Ts'ai Lun was later canonized as the

26. Just as we now keep as souvenirs the fountain-pens with which treaties have been signed!

27. The basic printing process itself, "by impression" of some colour-imbued matrix, may well have been known in the days of Ts'ai Lun; the universal "red hand marks" of neolithic days are, after all, "imprints." For some centuries, however, the sacred texts of China were still multiplied by "rubblings." (So were rubblings from both intaglio and relief carvings



protective god of the Chinese paper-makers. Ever since his days, the Far East has principally relied on hemp, the paper-mulberry, certain reeds, and similar vegetable fibres, for the production of a great many distinct qualities of paper, all, however, tougher and more porous than ours because the fibres are not cut up fine in the manufacture. This paper is not only excellent for writing and painting in water-colours, but may be used for innumerable more strenuous purposes, often replacing cloth.<sup>28</sup>

The knowledge of manufacturing paper was passed on to the Japanese in the year 610, by a Korean bonze called Donchō. Meanwhile, Japan has produced some of the finest papers in the world, and many of our own luxurious books pride themselves for being printed on Japan paper.

Most Chinese and Japanese papers, however, are so absorbent and translucent that they can only be written or printed on one side. Our

in metal or stone known to the ancient Greeks and Romans and other societies.) While we can hardly say that this was "printing," it must nevertheless have suggested its development at some subsequent date. Traditionally, the original *Shuo Wen Chieh Tsu*, the first encyclopaedia ever compiled, is said to have been printed in about the year 200. For centuries the system remained one of block-printing, the characters or pictures being carved in reverse relief on a wooden plank. In A.D. 593, Emperor Wen Ti is said to have had ancient sacred texts so printed and illustrated. Very early in the 11th century, however, movable type was introduced, made of hardened clay. The first cast copper type seems to have been produced in Korea in 1403.

In Japan the earliest known block-printing dates from the year 770, when Empress Shōtoku caused Buddhist charms to be printed on slips of paper for distribution among all the temples of the land. Japan retained block-printing even for books right up to the Restoration of 1868, although the Jesuit Visitor Valignano brought a printing press, types and matrices from Europe in 1590, together with what implements were needed for producing ideograms. The Mission's few books were curiosities, but did not induce the Japanese to adopt the process.

The earliest known dated block-illustration of Europe is the "Buxheim St. Christopher" of 1423. The invention of printing with type is generally ascribed to Gutenberg and the year 1474; but it has probably rightly been said that "It is fairly certain that the art of printing owed more to China than to either Faust or Gutenberg." A certain Pamphilo Castaldi, who used types of Murano glass in Feltre, expressly refers to the Chinese printed books which Marco Polo brought back to Italy, and on basis of which he, Marco Polo, "caused movable types to be made, each type representing a single letter, and with these he printed several broadsides and single leaves at Venice in the year 1426."

28. It is, however, entirely unsuited to our hard pen, and not much less to the pencil. Erasures are quite out of question.



sheet-form therefore was only suited to a restricted purpose. Manuscripts, whether letters or "books," were commonly written on scrolls. As the left hand held the paper, which was gradually unrolled from left to right, the writing automatically continued to be from right to left (in vertical columns).<sup>29</sup> Apart from the scrolls, however, and for printing in the main, true books, the Japanese *shomotsu*, were invented in 745 if not earlier, each sheet being folded in the middle, with the fold as outer edge on the left, and the cut edges forming the back, which is only stitched flat. The oriental book of course begins where ours ends. Books are not stood up on shelves but laid down. The "cover" consists of but two somewhat thicker, coloured papers, which quite correspond to the oldest wooden boards between which the bamboo and other "tablets" were held. When there is a set of books – and as each fascicule more or less only corresponds to one chapter, sets are numerous – they have a tight-fitting creased wrapper of cloth-covered cardboard, the *chitsu*, closed with two bone-"pins" or with ribbons.<sup>30</sup>

Another style of book was the *oribon*, folding book, as we employ for certain types of albums. The stiff basis is "broken" (*oru*) screen-wise, so that a double series of pages ensues, once front and once back. The two ends were reinforced with cardboard covers, often bound in brocade. The *oribon* were mainly used for paintings, with or without accompanying text.

Scrolls (*makimono*) at times are of very great length, many yards, when they naturally must be composed of several sheets of paper, large as these may be. The beginning of the scroll – which will be its outer layer – ends in a piece of brocade or other cloth which serves as wrapper, and is

29. In our westernized days, Japan uses a mixture of styles: vertical and horizontal, side-ways right to left, and left to right ... The reader may be interested to know that a fountain-pen in Japan has become a *mannen-pitsu*, a myriad years brush ...

30. We may note that the numerical suffix *maki*, roll, is still frequently used for books, instead of the more correct *satsu*. – In ancient Europe books of leaves or pages existed since the first century, but for a long time remained a sort of informal auxiliary to the more important scroll. The European book probably evolved from the older wax-coated folding tablets, used as memoranda.

“closed” with a length of tape. The end of the scroll is glued around a wooden rod, which serves as fulcrum for winding it up. The scroll is but rarely completely unwound: only a suitable length is “opened” at a time, with slowly progressing movements, horizontally, of course.<sup>31</sup> The seen part is loosely rolled by the right hand, and when the end is reached, the whole is wound back. Later on, scrolls were much used for depicting continuous landscapes, a system that permitted an admirable “unfolding” of the country, as if one traversed it by boat. The Japanese adapted the same method to battle-scenes, legends, historical events and so forth, and the result is a most vivid tale of their sequence, the progressive development of the story: a pictorial means which we completely lack in the West.<sup>32</sup> Many oriental scrolls combine pictures with the narrative itself in a most interesting manner, and we may here distinguish two types: those in which pictorial and literary sections alternate in rather regular divisions, and those in which text and illustration commingle, the writing filling any odd space left by the picture, before going on into a purely written passage. A third kind, much in use in Japan centuries ago, bestrewed the ground with arabesques, flowers, birds, even quadrupeds (if more rarely with landscapes), in colours, or gold, or silver, and then wrote the text over these ornamentations. The text too was considered “pictorial.” We may note, however, that while for many centuries religious or ceremonial manuscripts were written with sundry coloured inks, including gold and silver, on fancy paper of many hues, the impermanence of the decorative paper was fully recognized at an early date. Sutras and similar manuscripts intended for regular use at temples and shrines, were therefore written in black ink on a white paper impregnated with so-called *kiwada*, an anti-corrosive and insecticide drug of light yellowish colour.

31. Our own scrolls have to be more clumsily held “top and bottom,” vertically unwound, because of our horizontal writing.

32. This is the more surprising since we took over so much from Egypt, and the hieratic “books” of ancient Egypt were long rolls of papyrus, beautifully drawn and illustrated.

It was naturally found convenient to keep the size of scrolls within handy limits, and a lengthy opus was therefore written on several scrolls, again somewhat corresponding to our chapters. These were often kept together in beautiful lacquer boxes (analogous to the *scrinia* of the Romans), and some of the oldest temple-treasures are indeed gold or coloured lacquer Sutra containers of this kind, the *kyô-bako*. Valuable books in sets then received the same attention, being kept in elaborate *bunko*.<sup>33</sup>

From the scroll evolved the shorter, hanging *kakemono*, so distinctive a medium of decoration of China and Japan. In China one most often finds a *kakemono* of crimson paper – mounted in its brocade frame as usual – with some propitious inscription, whose fortunate colour and mystic characters will protect the household and ensure its continued happiness and prosperity. The Japanese do not use this red type, although at times they exhibit an inscription on a white *kakemono*; as a rule they prefer the *gaku*, framed panel, white, often enough with a golden background, which is placed above some door as a rule, against the wall or the *ramma* (carved transom).

In art representations we find both scrolls and books as auspicious subjects. In Buddhist symbolism, scrolls naturally stand for the sacred Sutra texts, and thus "the Store of Truth." Chinese philosophy makes them interpret "the unwritten book of Nature." They obviously also are an emblem of erudition, and even of more than acquired knowledge, of divine inspiration: they thus pertain to sages like Han-Shan (*Kanzan*), to Gods of Longevity like Shou-Lao (*Jurôjin*, the deified Laotse), and others. More comprehensively, scrolls indicate classical literature.

Books are representative less of erudition than of the gentle pastime of reading, of romances, love-stories, supernatural tales, such as the ladies loved. Indirectly therefore they stand for the quiet intimacy of home. One of the Chinese emblems of Good Augury (hardly known in

33. The *scrinia* were so gorgeously worked that Seneca cynically remarked that certain bibliophiles paid greater attention to beautiful cases, rods and titlings of the scrolls than to their literary contents. Is it so much different in our days, two-thousand years later?

Japan) consists of two books, overlapping, joined by a flowing bow. Such pictures are at the same time amuletic: since books contain innumerable magic ideograms (mixed as they may be), they are able to keep off evil spirits. Books or their pictures may therefore advantageously be kept under one's pillow while asleep ...

Passing reference may be made to "the burning of the books" by Shih Huang-ti, founder of the Ch'in dynasty, a happening still vivid in man's remembrance although it occurred in the year 213 B. C. Ever since, the memory of this tyrant but undoubtedly great social reformer, who already recognized the danger of scholastic ossification, has been held in abhorrence by the Chinese. Yet it was Shih Huang-ti, also, who introduced a simplified code of writing, which indubitably was of paramount importance in spreading and intensifying the Chinese civilization.<sup>34</sup>

Brush and paper, even printing type, need some suitable fluid, and this all over the Far East is made from that hard "cake" which we erroneously call India-ink, actually an invention of the Chinese going back to unknown antiquity. Like that of Chinese paper, the art of making Chinese ink was first introduced into Japan in the year 610, by the same Korean priest, Donchō. Yet to our day the Japanese consider Chinese ink superior to their own. The best qualities of ink-sticks are always sold in comparatively large boxes, with an exactly corresponding recess in the "padding," akin to what we have in our medal-cases. The Chinese boxes are mostly covered with multicoloured brocade, the Japanese ones are usually lacquered black. A strongly contrasting lining will forcefully bring out the ebony tone of the stick.

This "ink," what the Japanese call *sumi*, is usually a quadrilateral slab, of sundry proportions, hard as flint, whose main ingredients are

34. *Ch'in Shih Huang-ti*, First Emperor founder of the Ch'in dynasty, was a mighty figure, who consolidated the hundreds of petty states into a great empire, and built a great part of the Wall against the barbarians of the North. He put through many reforms, and established the principle, continued until the Republic, that no official should hold office in his home-province. But he was against the fossilizing traditions which were weakening the people, and in various ways roused the antagonism of scholars. His dynasty practically ended with his own death.

soot of resinous pine-wood, or also true "lampblack" obtained by burning sesamum oil in a smoky flame, under little air. To this is gradually added glue or varnish, perhaps some pork-fat – there are innumerable grades and qualities of *sumi*, Chinese and Japanese. The better grades also contain comphor, sandal-oil, musk, even tiny flakes of gold-leaf. Good ink is generally highly scented. The paste so resulting is thoroughly kneaded to proper consistence, and then formed in wooden moulds with carved ornamentations and inscriptions – auspicious, wise, or poetical – which come out in relief. The maker's name or seal may be added, and all the reliefs (if not the entire stick) may be coloured in blue or red, or gilt. Some *sumi* are extraordinarily large, and principally serve as presents, to please somebody by thereby declaring him to be considered one's "teacher." Ink-sticks are often collected, especially also if the inscription proves them to be "antiques." The older an ink-stick, by the way, the better its relative quality is presumed to be. Long ago books were already published which carefully described famous ink-sticks ... We must admit that many of them may be classed among the minor glyptic arts.<sup>35</sup>

This ink-stick is rubbed with some water on the ink-stone which we shall consider presently, and the fluid should be as black as possible, with an almost glossy sheen. The time taken in the rubbing should be of no concern; on the contrary, the philosophic Oriental says that "the careful preparing and rubbing of the ink helps in settling the mind," which can only be advantageous when one begins to compose the written pages.

When the Chinese say they are *t'ung-yen*, "same ink," that means that they were pupils of the same master, having, so to say, dipped their pens into the same ink-pot. The Chinese and to some extent the Japanese have a habit of sucking the brush into a fine point when writing, and the

35. I refer the interested reader to the specialized "Note on Ink Cakes," by R. H. van Gulick, in the *Monumenta Nipponica* of Sophia University, Vol. XI-1, Tokyo 1955. The author spent many years in China and Japan in the Dutch diplomatic service, and adduces sundry Chinese and Japanese books. His study clearly demonstrates the auspicious symbolism of the scholar's utensils.



phrase "to eat ink" has become a synonym for "to study." The sucking of the ink itself is considered healthy; rubbed on the lips and tongue, ink is a good remedy against fits and convulsions ...

For some obscure reason, the ink-stick enters the dragon lore of China, and there are a few pertaining stories, rather infantile. Possibly the link is the "black" factor, since the dragon produces the black rain-clouds. Possibly the way goes over the pine-smoke, dragons being in other occult manners connected with ancient pine-trees, whose cracked bark looks like dragon-scales, and the distorted, twisted branches like dragons straining to fly into space. Possibly it is simply a question of the dragon being the wisest animal, and ink the medium of conveying man's wisdom. At any rate most ink-sticks bear one or several images of dragons, coiled or rampant, "natural" or conventionalized *à outrance*, as the principal image or as a sort of border.

The next and last Treasure of the scholar's study is the ink-stone or -slab, needed to rub the ink on, the *suzuri-ishi* of the Japanese. Since only the stone lasts indefinitely, it is the main treasure, and will usually be handed down from father to son for many generations. From its quality will depend the fluidity and colour of the ink: it must be hard, yet not so hard as not to abrade the stick in microscopic portions; if too soft, it will be scraped off in powder, and spoil the ink. It must of course not be "oily" in character, nor should it be "absorbent." Even the best stick will give but poor results on an inferior stone, while even indifferent ink will become a beautiful black fluid if rubbed on the proper stone ...

The best ones are those which serve as an egg to some future dragon, since the dragon's element is moisture, which these stones preserve. Such stones have beautiful colours. But they become dangerous some thousand years after having been found, because the dragon has then accomplished its incubation, will burst the "egg," and, rapidly increasing in size, fly out of the room with thunder and lightning, not only smashing the roof but maybe causing even more serious damage ... This belief, certainly of Chinese origin, was still current in Japan in the 16th century.



The stone-slabs are frequently ornamented with very artistic sculptures – blossoms, fanciful animals (including again the dragon!), emblems of erudition and of good fortune. Once more we find the belief that age will bring forth a deeper gloss of the ink. China and Japan produce various stones recognized as first grade; most of them are of slaty gray, some are almost black, others again brown or speckled or "marbled".<sup>36</sup> A good stone will generally have the name of the maker engraved underneath. The slabs, however, need not be of stone: some were made from ancient tiles and considered excellent; others may even be made from some composition akin to very hard *papier mâché*, or of lacquered wood, or of porcelain and pottery. A little known fact is that during the *Sung* era in China, between the 10th and 13th century, ink-"stones" made of iron were fashionable. Naturally they too all find collectors.

Whatever its outline, the ink-slab will have scooped out a proportionately shallow "tray" at a slight slant, with a deeper pool at its farther end. A few drops of water are poured into the latter, and the stick, wetted at its tip, is repeatedly rubbed back and forth in the tray, blackening the water which regularly re-accumulates in the pool. This then serves as "ink." After dipping the brush into it, it is wiped on the slanting surface of the tray to get rid of superfluous ink, and at the same time keep the hairs pointed.<sup>37</sup> According to Japanese superstition, however, one should never "write some ideogram" on the ink-stone surface, as

36. In Japan, those found near Moji, near Shiogama (Sendai), and at Suzurishima ("Ink-stone Island," near Mt. Kimpusan, Kōfu district), are especially noted.

The Bay of Moji is even poetically called *Suzuri-no umi*, the Sea of the Ink-stones. Some stones found at Shiranoe, in this region, show natural whitish spots which resemble plum-blossoms (flower of the literati!), whence they are called *baika-seki*, plum-flower stones. They are legendarily connected with Sugawara no Michizane and his flight to Fukuoka, when he stopped at Shiranoe. (Michizane, 845–903, was a famous minister and calligraphist; he was banished to Dazaifu because of slanderous accusations, but posthumously reinstated into all his dignities and soon after deified as *Tenjin*, God of Literature and of Calligraphy.)

37. The plain, round porcelain-dish formerly used by our draughtsmen to produce "India-ink" is not known. Things should never be simplified too much to remain attractive!

one is apt to do when the character is not quite familiar, or even in the way we draw geometrical shapes on our pad. This bad habit will make one a duffer in writing ... The water used should be pure: the best, as said, will be dew collected in the morning. Never – another Japanese belief – be so lazy as to just use some tea out of the perpetually handy cup, or, worse, simply spit on the stone! Both of course are done, and both will again make you a dunce ... Only dragon-spittle is highly desirable, if obviously very rare, and perhaps no longer believed in even by the Chinese.

It is in the matter of ink-stone and water-container that we find a great difference between Chinese and Japanese customs. The Chinese stones are often of sundry auspicious forms, richly carved (even with human figures), while the Japanese ones are predominantly oblong, more rarely round. The Japanese usually have smaller stones, and less profusely sculptured, if at all.

The Chinese water-container is a small open bowl, with a tiny spoon with which the liquid is poured onto the slab. The bowl may be of metal, some stone (from cheap soapstone to most expensive jade), of crystal or porcelain – any suitable material at the maker's and buyer's taste. It will have the form of a blossom or leaf, of a peach, bird or fish, or again whatever fancy dictates, provided it be auspicious. Some are as small as, say, half an eggshell, others as large as a cup. There is an infinite variety, and some have their special hardwood stands.

The Japanese uses a miniature metal pot, or a "box" of square or any ornamental outline, as a rule flattish and with an infinitesimal spout. There will be a small air-hole somewhere, as otherwise the water could go neither in nor out. Usually the object and its opening is so small that it has to be shaken over the stone for a few drops to fall out. The bowl style is only used by painters, when large amounts of colour have to be rubbed at one time. The writer never produces ink in quantity, and thereby avoids heavy "crusts" which will form when the ink dries on the slab.

Both peoples keep their better stones in some covered receptacle. In China this may have the contours of the stone, which is then fixed into its base, the deep cover resting on the base's rim. The box will often be of vermilion lacquer ("Peking lacquer"), beautifully carved with favourable designs; or it may be of valuable carved wood, of inlay work, and so forth. The brushes, as we noted, are kept upright in a separate vase-like container. In Japan this arrangement is not customary: the stone is usually enclosed in a largish square box, with overhanging cover, together with the brushes, paper-knife, and other odds and ends. These boxes too will be of some choice wood or lacquered; and it is with the *suzuri-bako* of the wealthy that the art-lacquerer accomplished some of his most perfect masterpieces. At what time the first gold lacquer *suzuri-bako* was made I am not prepared to say, but specimens many centuries old have survived, and there is an old reference that Emperor Konoye, who reigned from 1142 to 1155, ordered some *suzuribako* "to be lacquered in *nashiji* (thickly sprinkled gold powder) in every part." Long before Tokugawa, fine *suzuribako* and other writing paraphernalia were needed for poetical competitions, guessing games, and other social entertainments of the nobility, when each host tried to dazzle his guests by the rich and artistic objects displayed.

The outline of a *suzuribako* is commonly quadrangular, and although sizes vary, we may say that some 8 × 9 inches will be about average. The box is always placed narrow end towards the user, with an upright design. Within the box will be some sort of frame to hold the stone in place (in the centre), with the tiny *mizu-ire* (water-holder) ensconced above it, and the *sumi*-stick usually placed below, or even fixed in a peculiar holder-handle with metal mount. Some "racks" on either side will bear the brushes, paper-knife, awl (for binding together sheets with a paper-twist) and other implements, all in matching gold lacquer. We may note in passing that in these boxes the ink-stone will usually be a plain oblong of black slate, but its rim, sides and bottom will also be lacquered in gold. The box's decoration, embracing an incredible as-

sortment of ideas, is most carefully executed in several techniques, and often not only encompasses the obverse of the cover, but also the reverse, with a sort of counterpart, and maybe the bottom with some additional details. Not infrequently the reverse is even finer than the obverse; the explanation is that at certain epochs it was fashionable, after lifting off the cover, to place it on the *tatami* upside-down, and the reverse should then be another, even greater artistic "surprise" to the beholder. The rest of the surfaces will be of best powdered gold (*nashiji*). These gorgeous *suzuribako* were not as a rule employed for general purposes: they were kept as a room-ornament, on the *chigai-dana* (built-in shelves) or some cabinet, or on the writing-desk itself, for the use of the honoured guests who were complimented with the request for some calligraphic-poetical specimen.

Although not considered necessary "treasures," we find, in China more frequently even than in Japan, paper-weights and wrist-rests used on the more ceremonial occasions. Both may be made from any pleasing material, the paper-weights of course of a certain heaviness, since they are meant to keep the paper flat on the desk's surface. Most frequently they are elongated, with some added projection in the middle, by which they can be grasped. They may be of inlaid or chiselled metal, of porcelain, jade, ivory and so forth, usually a quite attractive minor art-work. The wrist-rests are intended to facilitate exact strokes, since the whole hand moves the brush; at the same time they prevent a perspiring hand from inadvertently touching the porous paper. They are usually slightly vaulted, rather broad bars made of bamboo, ivory, bone and similar hard substances, with inlays or flat carvings which will not hamper the wrist. Both have become collectors' items, of course, and many are indeed very valuable. It may be added, on this occasion, that all these "incidentals," as we might call them, will be changed with the seasons. The Oriental is in every way susceptible to sensorial influences: he will use "cool materials" in summer and "warm" ones in winter: metal, jade, porcelains in summer, and wood, ivory or pottery, etc. in winter. The

impression which he receives from this variation is far stronger than the actual difference in temperature.

The Chinese writing table is tall, long but narrow, and mostly encumbered with odd objects, including books, a flower-vase, and an incense-burner. It somewhat resembles our own "messy" desk, although it has no drawers. Things are kept in boxes. Fine desks will be of beautifully carved ebony or the equally hard rose-wood, and the chair will match.

The Japanese never knew chairs, and their "writing stands" are abnormally low even for a person kneeling on the floor.<sup>38</sup> The somewhat higher true desk, *tsukue*, may have a couple of drawers and pigeon-holes, but is no work of art. It was only used by commoners. While for a short poem or a letter no desk is needed – the paper-roll being simply held in the left, and the writing done on its surface – the ornamental writing stand, the *bundai*, as a decorative object will compete with the writing box. Often, indeed, both are made of the same gold-lacquer, with matching designs. At times the *bundai* is of some other colour, or inlaid, and so forth, as a sort of foil to the showier box. The *bundai* will average about  $24 \times 14$  inches only, and be some  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches high. The single-plank top has two bars at the narrower sides, so that things shall not roll off. These bars, the front and back centres of the board, and the artistically excised legs, will be mounted with reinforcements of wonderfully chiselled bronze or silver.

One more ornamental "writing utensil" of the Japanese (the Chinese are much more practically simple in such matters) is the so-called *bunko*, which we usually call a document-box. This may be some  $13 \times 15$  inches or larger, and some 4 inches deep. Again art-lacquer of every description will figure. Sometimes *bunko* and *suzuribako* match; sometimes (although I would say only during later eras) the two boxes and the desk are all of the same gold lacquer, with companionate designs, generally well-known and idealized landscapes with a poetical significance.

38. However, painters usually have their paper or silk practically spread on the mats themselves, and many people also write that way, slightly leaning over in their squatting position.



Without further exploring these magnificent products of the Japanese art-lacquerer – which have nothing comparable in China or the West – we must be struck with the incredible values invested in these objects so palpably intended for the enhancement of a guest's writing. His graphs, the product of his character, receive the utmost homage through these jewels placed at his service.<sup>39</sup>

The “complimentary effusions” themselves are of course rarely written on ordinary paper. “Visitors’ albums” are not unknown, but more often one uses artistically prepared thin cardboards, shaded in colours or imprinted with delicate drawings: the narrow *tanzaku* or the square *shikishi* (about 3 × 12 inches and 10 inches each way, respectively).<sup>40</sup> The former are just sufficient for a stanza, so much liked by the Japanese; the latter may serve for longer texts, but a few lines with a bit of complementary ink-sketch will also be appreciated. Incidentally, *tanzaku* (sometimes smaller ones), inscribed with a spontaneous poetical thought inspired by the beauty seen, will be attached to blossoming plum and cherry trees when “flower-viewing,” and more vividly polychrome ones are similarly hung from the feathery bamboo bushes on the occasion of the Star-Festival, *Tanabata*, in the seventh month. Both *tanzaku* and *shikishi* may again be kept in beautiful boxes of appropriate size.

I am not aware that the Chinese ever had corresponding inscription-cards, but they did and do use letter-paper which is delicately imprinted – and sometimes hand-painted – with some lofty landscape or poetical flowers and arabesques.<sup>41</sup> Chinese and Japanese also were (and are) fond

39. The interested reader is referred to this author's study on “Japanese Art Lacquers” in the *Monumenta Nipponica* of the Sophia University, Vol. XV, Tokyo, 1959–1960 (in two parts), with over a hundred illustrations, including many of writing utensils.

40. Probably both are evolutions of the ancient *ninshô* greeting cards, fragments of which are already found in the 8th century *Shôsôin* Treasure-house. Gaily coloured and inscribed with gold ideograms, they were exchanged between friends to celebrate an auspicious event, and also collected.

41. Such letter-paper, I understand, is still known as *Hsüeh T'ao chien*, because over a thousand years ago, late in the 8th century, a woman called Hsüeh T'ao first thought of decorating the paper in such a way for her poems. She was born into an extremely poor family, and as a

of letter-paper with continuous, broad and strongly coloured wavy bands at top and bottom. At the same time the "faces" of paper-fans have been used since a millennium ago for poetical outpourings, in both countries; especially the folding *ogi*, while the less formal roundish *uchiwa* rather serves for paintings. And the fan, we must note, is not only a cooling instrument, but also a most mystic auspicious implement. Which all goes to show that writing was indeed "taken seriously," considered an occult art, worthy of an artistic and precious background.

Since calligraphy is so highly esteemed, the Japanese have set aside two days in particular on which to invoke the gods who may help one to attain proficiency. On the second of January, so to say the first "normal" day of the year, everybody should write some poetry or wise sentences, copying them if unable to compose them, in the best style that one knows how. This *kakizome*, first writing, is still much observed.<sup>42</sup> The other day is the *Tanabata* festival when, as we just saw, inscribed coloured tags are attached to a bamboo sprig. The many inscriptions are in praise of the Weaver-lady, *Shokujo*, and of her husband the Herder-prince, *Kengyû*; they will bestow their favour in love-matters, but also give a good writing hand ... On that day the dew for the ink should assuredly be collected before dawn – which also instils the habit of early rising for a full day's work!

Chinese and Japanese painting is much more closely related to their writing than is the case with us.<sup>43</sup> Most paintings are in the same media

girl earned a living by singing songs in the streets, being eventually sold into a sing-song house by her parents. She had a natural gift for poetry, however, which soon made her so famous that she was even called to Court, where she was greatly honoured. Her idea of painting the paper before inscribing a poem was so successful that it soon spread among not only the nobility but all the other ladies, and even gentlemen, able to write.

42. Every accomplishment should be practised on this day "for the first time" (in the new year), to ensure success during the coming twelvemonth.

43. Our pen-and-ink drawings and some etchings may be considered akin to our writing. The Greeks, however, seem to have esteemed drawing and writing as essentially one process, since they used the same word for both, just as the Japanese call both *kaku*, which basically means "to scratch."

(ink or water-colours on paper), with similar brushes held in the same manner. Both painting and writing have a bold characteristic because the brush is poised practically vertical, the strokes thus coming "from above," the arm being moved up to the shoulder. As a matter of fact writing is ethically held in even greater veneration than painting, and that is one of the reasons why we so often find a group of ideograms, or even a single one, as a decoration, rather than the whole picture which these ideograms are meant to evoke. In Japan, in earlier days, some particularly idealistic artist may even have given us the poetical scenery as but a decorative theme, with some more important ideograms scattered over it – almost like an acrostic – the so-called *ashide-ye*. It even went so far that during the latest century of the Tokugawa rule, when the sciences secretly learnt from the Dutch traders at Nagasaki began to gain influence, artists in many crafts used scrawls intended to reproduce European writing as an "interesting" and maybe even occultly favourable ornament ...

Writing, it is said, should be graceful but also strong, like the bamboo. The writing of one of the most famous Chinese calligraphers, Mi Fei of the 11th century, "was compared by one admirer to the play of a sharp sword in the hands of a master of fence, and by another to the movements of a mettlesome horse under a rider who controls him without the aid of bit or bridle." But one Wang Hsi-chih, who lived in our 4th century, is still the paragon of Chinese calligraphers ...

There can hardly be a doubt that the veneration for the hand-written character was one of the main reasons why until quite modern times books were almost exclusively printed from cut wood-blocks rather than from movable type. Copper types, "clear, beautiful and elegant," as a contemporary wrote, "and which, when arranged in rows, look like a string of pearls," already existed in China in the 15th century. But the type is monotonously even, while the carved block permits full individuality. The blocks may be cut to practically reproduce an antique original, or they may show the impressive hand of a known calligraphist.

Even Emperor Ch'ien Lung (1736–1796), when he published the most important works of Chinese literature, kept in his library in manuscripts, ordered the four thousand volumes to be reproduced by block-printing, as this would nearest conserve their classical aspect.

Remarkable is the difference between Chinese and Japanese ideograms, although they both use the same strokes. Whether written or printed, a little familiarity with them will at once disclose whether they are Chinese or Japanese. We need not go into technicalities; but the Chinese characters always look harder, squarer, as if chiselled, while the Japanese ones are more elastic, less constrained, lighter.<sup>44</sup>

The Japanese are possibly the most assiduous writers on earth – and not only as regards amateur authors, who have always been legion. It is amazing how frequently even the lowest class people exchange letters and postcards. On many occasions polite enquiries as to health and general conditions are *de rigueur* – when it is very hot, when it is very cold, after an illness, a voyage, some natural disaster, and a good many more things. But most often the letters exchanged just give news and discuss some topics of mutual interest.

The effort which the child already has to make to learn writing, gives it a surprising mastery over its hands, as well as a scrutinizing eye. Hence we may well say that every Oriental knows how to sketch with fair accuracy. Interesting is also the habit of youngsters to imitate the calligraphic style of some admired person. As a consequence, the young clerks of a foreign firm will each one endeavour to faithfully copy the handwriting of that foreign "boss" whose personality most appeals to him!

A good two hundred and fifty years ago the wise moralist, Kaibara Ekken, wrote: "In making the books of the Sages your teachers, brush, ink, paper and ink-slab your friends, you will receive great happiness and much benefit." They are, indeed, "Treasures."

44. However, even with our less complicated alphabet one can usually distinguish an English hand from a French or German or Italian one, and even more so from an American, bad as the scribble may be. And in our own calligraphy too, the eye will immediately recognize a certain beauty, or force, balance, from the right proportions of the components.