

# English Translation of Classical Chinese Calligraphy Masterpieces

## 英譯法書

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滾長江東折浪淘英雄是非成敗轉空  
 青山依舊在幾度夕陽紅白髮漁樵江渚上  
 慣看秋月春風畫濁酒喜相逢  
 都付笑談中

楊慎臨江仙二十六年仲夏  
 滄君尚士於書二第



KS Vincent Poon's calligraphy of

Yang Shen's *The Immortals by the River* (楊慎臨江仙)

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KS Vincent Poon's model of Wang Xizhi's (王羲之)

Shi De Shu Tie (適得書帖), Zhi Yu Dong Tie (知欲東帖), Cha Liang Tie (差涼帖)

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## INTRODUCTION

且夕於巨勅教清初想之  
 下以遂之州將相公去至  
 情念之六數使急也海無是  
 外任為書問世他仁祖日法言  
 為此破如何可也

伏想  
 媿安亦自下憲佳格  
 上六至米隔十一年以  
 為一集且悲且望何物  
 喻媿亦至萬分憂  
 懷甚深終始以能  
 為情地自至然不  
 以之然如命一美白  
 海新新耳  
 王羲之且夕帖伏想  
 帖成成沙君為於

KS Vincent Poon's model of Wang Xizhi's (王羲之)

Dan Xi Tie (且夕帖) and Fu Xiang Tie (伏想帖)

# **English Translation of Classical Chinese Calligraphy Masterpieces**

## **Introduction**

(I)

One major area in traditional Chinese culture is the art of Chinese calligraphy. Unfortunately, Chinese calligraphy is often misunderstood to be merely a pursuit to scribe pretty Chinese characters. Unbeknownst to many, mastering the art actually requires one to cultivate one's temperament in addition to being technically adept. Indeed, the art of Chinese calligraphy was long ago recognized to be "a testament to one's moral character"<sup>(1)</sup>, "an expression of one's inner emotions"<sup>(2)</sup>, and an art that requires seamless coordination between the hands and mind<sup>(3)</sup>. Hence, Chinese calligraphy in the Tang Dynasty was accordingly described as *shudao/shodo* "書道 (a pursuit towards enlightenment via the path of studying calligraphy)" rather than *shufa* "書法 (methods and techniques in scribing calligraphy)"<sup>(4)</sup>. In fact, the influential *A Narrative on Calligraphy* (or *Shu Pu*, 書譜) written by Tang Dynasty's Sun Guoting (孫過庭) largely focused on discussing personal temperaments in scribing calligraphy rather than individual calligraphic techniques.<sup>(5)</sup>

As such, to fully appreciate a masterpiece of Chinese calligraphy (often known as "法書", which refers to an outstanding and exemplary work that is worth for all to study and observe), aside from examining its apparent aesthetics, one must also consider the overall manner expressed in the work, the personal background of the calligrapher, its textual content, as well as the historical and cultural context in which it was written.

(II)

Sadly, there are currently no satisfactory English translations of prominent classical Chinese calligraphy masterpieces such as *Cao Quan Stele* (曹全碑), *Lanting Xu* (蘭亭帖) and *Huai Su's Autobiography* (懷素自叙帖). For instance, Patricia Ebrey's English translation of *Cao Quan Stele* possesses numerous misinterpretations<sup>(6)</sup>, and even renowned translator Lin Yutang's (林語堂, 1895-1976) translation of *Lanting Xu* contains significant errors and omissions that can lead to a great deal of misunderstanding of the original text<sup>(7)</sup>. It is therefore exceedingly difficult for English speakers to fully appreciate the wonders of these masterpieces as they cannot completely and accurately comprehend the scribed texts and their cultural implications. The present book shall provide readers with precise, annotated, line-by-line and high fidelity English translations of five classical Chinese calligraphy masterpieces. Translations are accompanied by brief historical backgrounds of the artworks as well as comments and footnotes to guide readers to better understand their values and cultural significances. The five selected masterpieces are:

1. *Cao Quan Stele* (曹全碑) by an unknown calligrapher (185AD);
2. *Lanting Xu* (蘭亭帖) by Wang Xizhi (王羲之, 303-361AD);
3. *Elaborations on the Chronicle of Ni Kuan* (倪寬贊帖) by Chu Sui-liang (褚遂良, 596-658AD);
4. *A Poem on General Pei* (裴將軍帖) by Yan Zhenqing (顏真卿, 709-785AD);
5. *Huai Su's Autobiography* (懷素自叙帖) by Huai Su (懷素, 725-785 AD or 737-799 AD).

It is my sincere hope that this book can help English speakers to resonate with and wholly appreciate the wonders of these great works.

KS Vincent Poon  
Jan 2019

## Footnotes

- (1). KS Vincent Poon & Kwok Kin Poon, *A Narrative on Calligraphy by Sun Guoting* 英譯書譜. Toronto: The SenSeis, 2018, p.25, Line102, “驗燥濕之殊節，千古依然”。
- (2). Ibid, p.25, Line 101, “故可達其情性，形其哀樂”。
- (3). Ibid, p.53, Line 257, “無間心手”。
- (4). As indicated in 《中國書法大辭典》：

誠如唐虞世南《筆髓論》所言：「故知書道玄妙，必資神遇，不可以力求也。」明董其昌《畫禪室隨筆》卷一《評書法》曰：「總之欲造極處，使精神不可廢沒。所謂神品，以吾神能著故也。何獨書道，凡事皆爾。」清包世臣《藝舟雙楫》：「書道妙在性情，能在形質。」皆主張以人之質為書之本。「書道」一詞，起源甚早，唐人論書著作中多見之。

As mentioned by renowned Tang Dynasty Calligrapher Yu Shinan, “to grasp the essence of *shudao/shodo* (書道), one must perceive and understand it in the mind but not by brute physical force.” Ming Dynasty’s Dong Qichang also wrote, “at the highest level (of calligraphy), one’s spirit must not be absent. To create an outstanding piece of calligraphy, one must inject one’s mind and soul into the work and write with one’s heart. This philosophy is certainly not exclusively restricted to *shudao/shodo* (書道) but applies to everything else that we do.” Qing Dynasty’s Bao Shichen wrote, “the essence and ingenuity of *shudao/shodo* (書道) is temperament, while being capable to scribe well the exterior physical forms comes second.” Hence, it is apparent that personal character and mind are fundamental to scribing calligraphy. The term *shudao/shodo* (書道) originated long time ago; it

is a term that is frequently seen in writings by people of the Tang Dynasty regarding Chinese calligraphy.

(interpreted by KS Vincent Poon)

Source: 梁披雲主編,《中國書法大辭典》. 廣東: 廣東人民出版社, 1991, p.73.

(5). See footnote (1).

(6). In “*Later Han Stone Inscriptions*” (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1980, pp. 325–353), Patricia Ebrey published an annotated English translation of *Cao Quan Stele* that contains numerous misinterpretations. The major misinterpretations are highlighted as follows:

i.) “效穀人也” was misinterpreted as “(Cao Quan) comes from Chiao-ku”. This phrase should be interpreted as “(Cao Quan’s) ancestral home (籍貫) was in the county of Xiaogu (效穀縣)”. The phrase does not necessarily mean Cao Quan was physically born and came from there.

ii.) “既定爾勳，福祿攸同” was simply interpreted as “all shared in the benefits”; “既定爾勳” was omitted and not translated.

iii.) “甄極毖緯” was incorrectly interpreted as “looked in the abstruse and was attentive to details”. “毖緯” is actually “識緯之學”, which refers to the study of various arts of prophesizing that are based on classical Chinese teachings.

iv.) “無文不綜” was incorrectly interpreted as “there being no written words he did not investigate”. “綜” here should be “精通 (well versed with thorough and comprehensive understanding)” not “investigate”.

v.) “易世載德，不隕其名” was erroneously interpreted as “Many generations will record his virtue; his name will not be lost”. “載德” is absolutely not “record one’s virtue” while “其名” here in

fact refers to the family name Cao not just Cao Quan.

vi.) “同僚服德” was incorrectly interpreted as “his colleague fell under the influence of his virtue”. “服” here is certainly not “fell under the influence of”.

vii.) “威牟諸賁” was incorrectly interpreted as “his stern demeanor stimulated the soldiers”.

viii.) “咸蒙瘳悛” was incorrectly interpreted to carry the meaning of “[clothes] to keep them warm”.

ix.) “鄉明而治” was incorrectly interpreted as “The villages became enlightened”. “鄉” here is actually “嚮/向 (directed towards)”. “嚮明而治” is in fact an idiom derived from *I Ching* (《易經》) and carries no meaning of “villages being enlightened”.

x.) “升降揖讓朝覲之階” was incorrectly translated to “People were going up and down, bowing and giving way on the steps of the audience hall”. “升降揖讓” should together be interpreted as the adjective of the main object “朝覲之階(steps/stairs of the audience hall)”. “People” is absolutely not the main object of the phrase.

xi.) “懿明后，德義章” was erroneously interpreted as “His (Cao Quan) exceptional wisdom was ample; his virtue and propriety were manifest”. “明后” is actually a common term describing the ruling Emperor while “懿” means “praise”, and so “德義章” refers to the ruling Emperor’s virtue and propriety being seen and shown to all. The entire sentence was hence written to proclaim the ruling Emperor not Cao Quan.

xii.) “闕嵯峨” was incorrectly interpreted as “To make a gap towards the peaks”.

xiii.) “鄉明治，惠沾渥” was incorrectly interpreted as “The