***1*** Calligraphy, or the art of writing, was the visual art form prized above all others in ancient China. Painting and calligraphy shared identical tools — namely, brush and ink. Yet calligraphy was revered as a fine art long before painting. Indeed, it was not until the Song Dynasty, when painting became closely related with calligraphy in aim, form and technique, that calligraphy joined the higher ranks of the fine arts.

***2*** The elevated status of calligraphy reflects the importance of the words in China. In ancient times, emperors asserted their authority for descendants by engraving their achievements on stone steles erected in the wild areas. In pre-modern China, those scholars working with written words came to assume the dominant positions in government, society, and culture.

***3*** But in addition to the central role played by the written words in traditional Chinese culture, what makes the written language distinctive is its visual form. Learning how to read and write Chinese is difficult because there is no alphabet or phonetic system. Each written Chinese word is represented by its own unique symbol, a kind of abstract diagram known as a “character”, and so each word must be learned separately through a laborious process of writing and rewriting the character till it has been memorized. To read a newspaper requires a knowledge of around 3,000 characters; a well-educated person is familiar with about 5,000 characters; a professor with perhaps 8,000 characters. More than 50,000 characters exist in all, but the great majority of them are not used any more.

***4*** Yet the limitation of the written Chinese language is also its strength. Unlike written words formed from alphabets, Chinese characters convey more than phonetic sound and semantic meaning. Traditional writings about calligraphy suggest that written words play multiple roles: not only does a character denote specific meanings, but its form should reveal itself to be a moral exemplar, as well as a manifestation of the energy of the human body and the vitality of nature itself.

***5*** Consider one Tang-Dynasty text that describes calligraphy in human terms. Here, the properly written character assumes the identity of a Confucian sage: “A written character should stand balanced on all four sides…Leaning or standing upright like a proper gentleman, the upper half of the character sits comfortably, while the bottom half supports it.” (From an anonymous essay, Tang Dynasty)

***6*** Other writings on calligraphy make use of nature images to display the power of calligraphy and express the sense of wonder:

“When viewing calligraphy, I have seen the wonder of a drop of dew glistening from a dangling needle, a shower of rock hailing down in a thunder, a flock of geese gliding in the sky, frantic beasts stampeding in terror, a phoenix dancing, a startled snake slithering away in fright1.” (Sun Guoting, 7th century) “A dragon leaping at the Gate of Heaven; A tiger crouching at the Phoenix Tower.” (Description of the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi by Emperor Wu of Liang4 (464—549))

***7*** And so, despite its abstract appearance, calligraphy is not an abstract form. Chinese characters are dynamic, closely bound to the forces of nature. These energies are contained within a balanced framework, which is the manifestation of the writer’s own moral integrity.

***8*** How can a simple character convey all this? The use of brush and ink has much to do with it. The seeming simplicity of the tools displays the complexity of effects. A multiplicity of effect is produced in part by varying the consistency and amount of ink carried by the brush. The calligrapher can control the thickness of the ink by varying both the amount of water and the ink. Once he starts writing, by loading the brush sometimes with more ink, sometimes with less, by allowing the ink to almost run out before dipping the brush in the ink again, he creates characters that resemble a shower of rock here, the wonder of a drop of dew there.

***9*** The brush, above all, endows calligraphy with myriad possibilities. Unlike the fountain pen and ballpoint pen, the flexible hair brush can change the width of strokes. If one is able to skillfully use the tip or side of the brush, he can create either two-dimensional or three-dimensional effects. And depending on the speed with which one wields the brush and the amount of pressure exerted on the writing surface, one can create a great variety of writing effects.

***10*** The brush becomes an extension of the writer’s arm, indeed, his entire body. The physical gestures produced by the wielding of the brush reveal much more than physical motion; they reveal much of the writer himself — his impulsiveness, restraint, elegance, and rebelliousness. Abstract as it appears, calligraphy more easily conveys emotions of the individual artist than other Chinese visual arts except for landscape painting, which became closely related with calligraphy. It is no wonder that the 20thcentury American Abstract Expressionists felt a kinship to Chinese calligraphers.