

Calligraphy Master

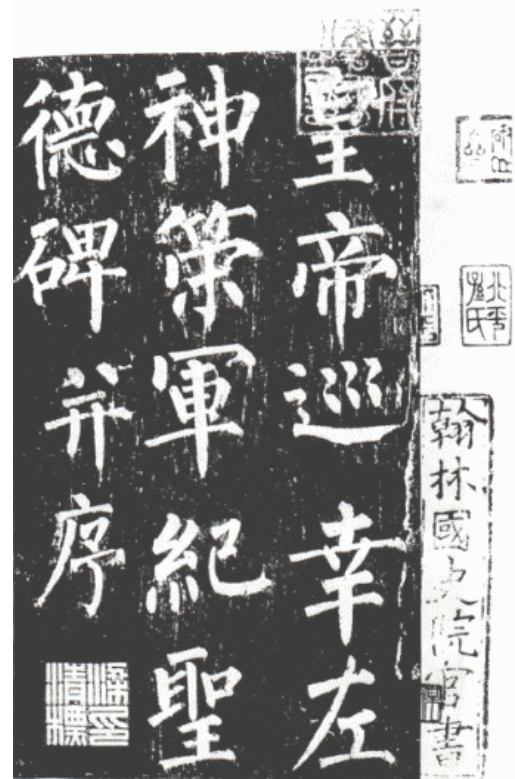


Liu Gong Quan 柳公權 (778-865), was a very famous calligraphy master. His style of calligraphy is the style that all Chinese children have to copy when they study traditional Chinese calligraphy and this is because his writing is so good and so beautiful. He was so good that in the end he was appointed to be the teacher of the heir to the throne of China, the Prince who would be the next emperor of China. In Chinese traditional culture one of the highest positions of respect is the teacher to the heir to the throne. Anyone who held a high position in the Tang Dynasty was proud to have Liu's calligraphy. In particular when a high ranking government official died his family would be proud to have Liu Gong Quan write on the grave stone. This was not only because his writing was so good, but also because he had the highest moral character in the whole government.

Once the emperor asked Liu how a person could develop good calligraphy. Liu replied "Holding the brush is based on the heart. If the heart is proper then the brush will be proper and the calligraphy will be right.用筆在心,心正則筆正". We can see how proper his heart was.

However, when he was little, he was not that good, his father and his teacher always criticised him. Slowly as he started to grow up, he understood that having bad writing is not very nice and would make people look down on him. So he made up his mind that he would make his writing better and he practised day and night. When he was about thirteen or fourteen he was already known in his village and the towns around his area for his writing, and this made him feel proud of himself.

One day he was practising his calligraphy outside his house under a big mulberry tree. He was practising the three most difficult Chinese characters to write, phoenix 鳳, flying 飛 and family 家. All calligraphy masters say, "High level calligraphy masters still find it difficult to write phoenix, flying and family 神筆難寫鳳飛家." He wrote those words again and again, and in the end when he was very happy with them, he put them up on the tree together with a poem he had written, "Can write phoenix, flying and family so well, can be proud in front of other people 會寫鳳飛家, 敢在人前夸"



There was an old man, who sold Tofu, passing by. He looked at the words and Liu's poem and he found that this young man was so cocky. Shaking his head and stroking his long white beard he said to Liu, "Your calligraphy still has a long way to go. Your writing is just like my tofu, it has no strength. What is there to be so proud of?" Liu was very upset and argued back at the old man saying, "Around here no one's calligraphy is better than mine. Everybody says my calligraphy is good, what makes you say that?" The old man knew Liu was not happy at his criticism, so he was not upset with Liu but he said, "I don't need to argue with you. If one day you have time, go to Hwa Yuan County 華原縣城, find Calligraphy Tang 字畫湯 and then you will know." After saying that the old man walked away. Of course Liu was still not happy, "In this area, how can anyone else's calligraphy be better than mine? He then stopped his practice and packed everything away to go back home.

Next morning he travelled to Hwa Yuan County to find Calligraphy Tang. As soon as he walked through the gate of Hwa Yuan County he saw that there was writing hanging on a big locust tree.

Under the tree there was a skinny old man who had no hands but was writing on the paper with his leg. That was Calligraphy Tang. His calligraphy was beautiful with good strength and it had special character which earned a lot of applause from the people who had gathered around him.

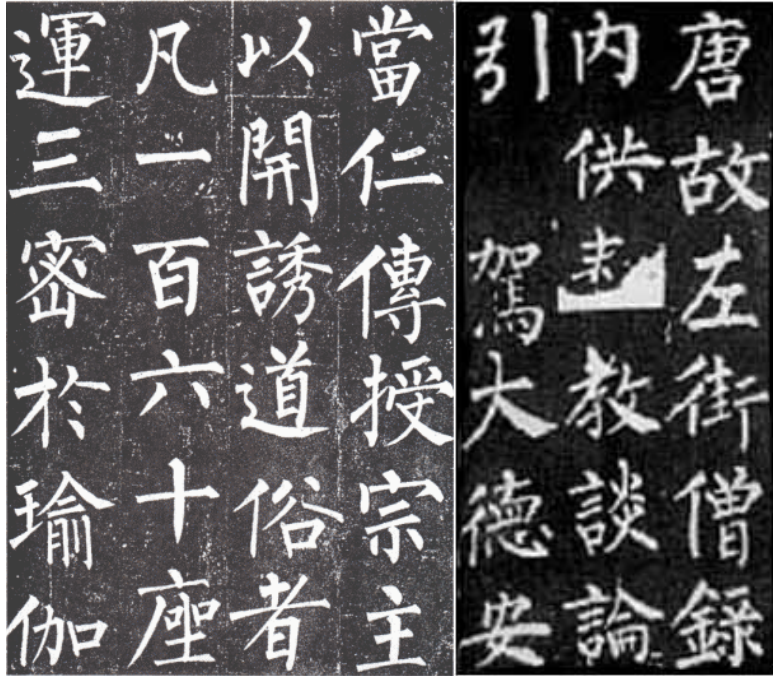
Watching the old man's calligraphy, Liu realised that his calligraphy was so simple and basic. How could he think he was number one in the area?

He knelt down on his knees in front of the old man, hoping that the old man would accept him as a student so that he could learn his calligraphy. Calligraphy Tang looked at him and smiled but said, "I am too old and have no energy to teach anybody. You'd better go home."

Liu did not give up as it was not easy to find someone who was that good at calligraphy. He continued kneeling in front of Calligraphy Tang hoping that he would accept him to be his student.

After quite a long time and also in front of many people who were now watching, the old man had no other solution and said, "Okay, I will give you some advice. If you can follow that you will be successful."

Calligraphy Tang held his brush and wrote the advice on a piece of white paper. His beautiful calligraphy read, "After using all the ink from eight big buckets, while washing the ink slab (this a slab for holding the ink while we are writing) the whole pond can turn dark. After learning all high level styles of calligraphy, pick the best of them. This is the beginning of the dragon and phoenix flies. 寫盡八缸水,硯染澗池黑. 博取百家長,始得龍鳳飛." Liu remembered what the old man's poem said and then bowed to him for giving him this advice. Liu then went back home.



Ever since that day Liu practised much harder. Any other style of good calligraphy he copied and learnt from. He thought about what was special about them. In particular the famous calligraphy of Yan Zhen Xing 顏真卿, Ou Yang Shou 歐陽修 and Calligraphy Tang. He also observed nature, the animals like cows and sheep and looked at the body structures. He watched the wild geese flying and the fish swimming in the water and tried to pick up the natural feeling. From all of this he then created his own style of calligraphy. In the end Liu Gong Quan became the most famous and highly respected calligraphy master in all of history.

By Michael Tse