

## The Synergy of Positive and Negative Space in Japanese Calligraphy

Tomoko NAKASHIMA

Japanese calligraphy is an art that can transcend its simplicity and restriction to create beautiful masterpieces. It relates to literature, drawing, and music. Though the beauty lies in such things as the arrangement, brush strokes, and the color of the *sumi* (ink), the synergy of positive and negative space is the most important. When a work has negative space which can express strength, insistence, profundity, refreshingness, enrichment, and warmth, it becomes a masterpiece.

The synergy of positive and negative space is illustrated by the works of such writers as Ryoukan and Hakuin. As calligraphy reflects a writer's whole being, the synergy cannot be created only through training and skill. It is created by the writer's spirit of life.

The concept of negative space and *ma* in Japanese calligraphy, an inherent characteristic of Japanese culture, can be seen in many aspects of the culture: houses, gardens, silence, and *yoin* (a reverberation in the sense of an overtone; resonance).

**Key words** : Japanese calligraphy, synergy of positive and negative space, Ryoukan  
日本の書、白と黒の共鳴、良寛

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate and convey that the synergy of positive and negative space plays a vital role in Japanese calligraphy and negative space is not considered empty but rather is as important as positive space. In this paper, positive space is defined by the color of the *sumi*, which is usually black, and negative space is defined by the color of the paper, which is usually white. Positive and negative space is used here instead of black and white space because in the West white space is generally regarded as empty, negative space. This paper is divided into five sections regarding calligraphy: basic principles, history, categories, the synergy of positive and negative space, and how other aspects of Japanese culture may share com-

mon characteristics.

#### . Basic principles of Japanese calligraphy

Calligraphy is a creative art which attempts to express spiritual depth and beauty by means of *kanji* and *kana* characters with a brush and *sumi* ink. The quality of a work of calligraphy depends on the beauty of its expression, which is created through brush strokes, structure, the color of the *sumi*, and the arrangement and the content, which includes style and meaning.

Though the art of beautiful handwriting is practiced in the West, calligraphy is more highly developed in China, Korea, and Japan. Chinese characters (*kanji*) have meanings and complicated structures. Different types of brushes make it possible to produce varying types of strokes and lines: soft,

firm, rich, fine, fast, slow, thick, thin, calm, and lively.

Japanese calligraphy relates to three cultural aspects: literature, drawing, and music. As it conveys words and messages, it is like literature, and as it uses Chinese characters or hieroglyphic characters, and creates form, it is formative art. Also it is like an impromptu, taking into account speed and rhythm. In addition, it is three-dimensional art. Good works are three-dimensional and deep.

Calligraphy is beautiful in its restriction and simplicity. There are certain orders in each character that you have to follow when you write. You are not allowed to trace the same path twice or leave some parts for another time. Your spirit comes forth by expressing yourself through everything you have experienced and accumulated in your life up to that moment. In this way, calligraphy is like life. You cannot go back to the past or visit the future. What is important is the present. Because of the restriction and simplicity, calligraphy has deepened its being, and you can use your imagination freely and feel and appreciate works of calligraphy.

Because writing expresses the personality of the writer, a good work is considered to be one that impresses and moves the observer. In this way, the works of the monks are highly appreciated because observers can feel their ways of looking at life. They feel spiritual depth from their works. Ryōkan's calligraphy is somewhat like an abstract painting and it is difficult to read and understand, however, his works are very popular. He was a monk and lived a simple life. His works impress people because his way of living is shown in his writings. Even those who don't have much interest in calligraphy feel his way of living; he was both free from being greedy and free from a secular world.

Calligraphy was one of the most important subjects in school education during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But now, with the development of computers and ball-point pens, calligraphy has lost its practical value. In senior high schools, a decreasing number of students choose calligraphy when deciding between music, calligraphy, and art.

Yet even nowadays, Japanese people like to hang calligraphy done by an expert or a celebrity in the

alcove of their houses. Their doors have name plates on which the names of the family are written by means of calligraphy. It is customary that on January 2<sup>nd</sup> of each year, students and devotees take part in what is called the "First Writing of the New Year." Thus calligraphy is deeply rooted in Japanese life, though its popularity is decreasing among the younger generation.

## . History of calligraphy

The art of calligraphy has a history of over 3000 years. It originated from pictograms engraved on animal bones. Then people engraved on the surface of metalware (*kinbun*), which was followed by the development of *tensho* characters used on official seals.

During China's Tang dynasty (616-907), five writing systems were developed. They were *tensho* (seal characters), *reisho* (squared characters), *sosho* (cursive script), *gyosho* (semi-cursive script), and *kaisho* (square writing). These five writing systems are known as the classical calligraphic system.

Chinese characters (*kanji*) were first introduced to Japan from China about 2000 years ago. Japanese used only Chinese characters until they eventually formulated their own phonetic script, known as *kana*. In the Heian Period (794-1192), which is notable for its natively inspired culture, there was a move away from the Chinese style of writing, *kanbun*, to the Japanese *kana* phonetic syllabary, which made possible the written expression of Japanese sensitivities for the first time. In Japan, calligraphy had its transition and golden age in the Heian Period. There were many masters of calligraphy whose masterpieces are highly appreciated.

Culture is fluid, and therefore modern calligraphy has been developed to meet the changes in society where fewer and fewer people can read Chinese poems because of decreasing hours of studying Chinese poems in junior and senior high schools. Some of the changes have been the appearances of avant-garde calligraphy and *kindai shibun sho*, or *kanji kana majiri bun*, which will be explained next.

## . Categories of calligraphy

### A . *Kanji* calligraphy

This is Chinese poetry written in Chinese characters. The influence of ancient Chinese writing styles remains strong. One problem is that fewer and fewer people in Japan can understand Chinese poetry.

**B . Kana, Japanese syllabary calligraphy**

This is calligraphy using the Japanese syllabary (*kana*). The 31-syllable *waka* poems, as well as *haiku*, are elegantly transcribed. Because some special Chinese characters are used for *kana*, which are called *hentai gana*, fewer people can understand their meanings.

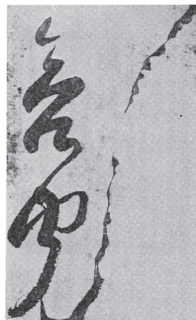
**C . Kindai shibun sho (Modern writing)**

This is a new type of calligraphy, which originated after World War II to meet the needs of the common people, so it can be read and enjoyed by everyone. This style employs a mixture of *kanji* and *kana* to write modern poetry or words and phrases of wisdom, *haiku* poetry, *waka* poetry, and the like.

**D . Avant-garde calligraphy**

This form of calligraphy developed along with a new movement in Japanese art after World War II. It tries to go beyond mere writing, and it is similar to drawing pictures though you never trace the same line twice. Image and personal impression may be more necessary in this form than any other form of calligraphy. Avant-garde brush work influenced abstract art in the West. Because this is quite a new genre, and some calligraphers try whatever seems new, there is no established aesthetic or standard of beauty. But it is possible to say that this style of calligraphy can be found in the old times. This example is a part of Kuukai's calligraphy written in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, which can be considered avant-garde.

Hikari wo fukumu  
含光 by Kuukai

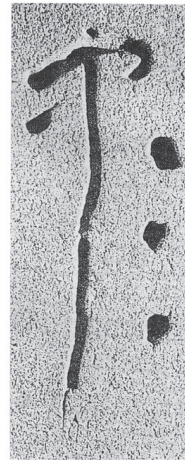


**. The synergy of positive and negative space**

**A . Negative space is not empty**

In the following examples, the negative space is clearly not empty, and works in synergy with the positive space.

Chu 中



This sharp vertical line is filled with spirit and it extends to three dots. The vertical line has an enormous power and presence, and it needs and demands the negative space. This work shows very subtle balance. The dots are marked strongly and decisively. One can feel the strong drive and soul when the brush went up and touched the paper. Each dot has a different shape, direction, and negative space.

Mu 無 by Hakuin



This is also a very powerful and impressive work. Both the positive and negative spaces are fulfilled and the negative space is never empty.

Ai zan 愛山 by Jiun

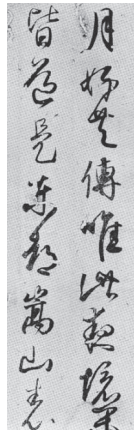
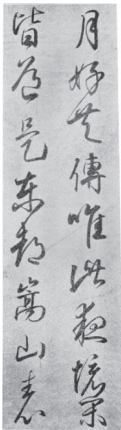


The Chinese character “愛 ai” is placed a little above the center and tilts to the left. The powerful fourth line in the center is caught firmly by the line next to it, the last line of “山 yama,” which is on the left. The angle of each line of “山 yama” fits perfectly. The negative space above “愛 ai” and “山 yama” increases each potential. The negative space in the left above “山 yama” is fulfilled because each line of “山 yama” fulfills its potential.

The negative space of these works catches the powerful positive space. The negative space also contains its own strong existence. There is a beautiful powerful synergy of positive and negative space.

B . Richness in negative space

The following two works differ in their relationships between positive and negative space.



Hakushikan 白詩卷

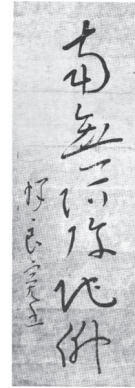
The one on the right was written by Fujiwara Kouzei in the Heian Period. Each line has richness that extends beyond the character itself and into the negative space. The positive and negative spaces

are thus fused. The negative space is not paper white but it is a negative space that has depth and warmth.

As for the other, each line is stiff and closed in itself and therefore isolates the positive from the negative space. The negative space is narrow, rigid, and meager as if it is shrugging its shoulders. This negative space is empty and only paper white. This work evokes a certain coldness as if one were standing without clothes in a storm.

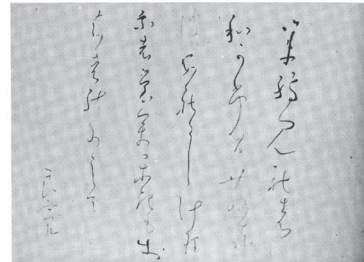
C .The synergy of positive and negative space in Ryoukan's works

Namumidabutu  
南無阿弥陀佛



Ryoukan wrote the first and second characters largely and slowly and the third and fourth characters together and closely. The fifth character is positioned a little away from the center and leaves negative space between itself and the fourth character. The last character brings these characters together as a whole.

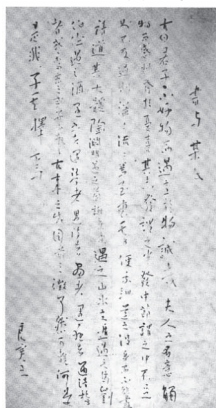
Kitemireba きて見れば



Ryoukan wrote the first and the second lines slowly and placidly. In the third line he wrote the second character from the top small and slowly.

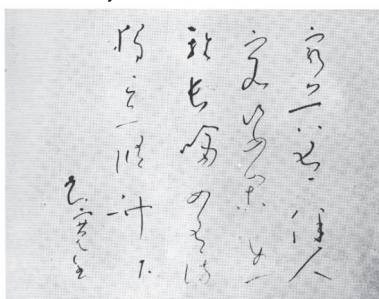
Then, he began to write fast. In the fourth line, he wrote similar characters with very slight changes, and just before writing the last character he dipped his brush into the ink to make a bold stroke. This final character works like the pivot of a folding fan and draws the pieces together. In the fifth line he finished in a light and easy style.

Shoshite boushi ni atafu 書与某氏



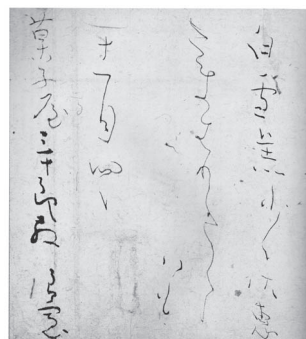
He was able to compose about 150 words easily. There is squared writing, semi-cursive script, and cursive script in the work. The lines are not straight but winding. Some characters are large and some are small. This calligraphy is as free as a bird, and beautifully coordinated in the interplay of positive and negative space. The way he composed his work represents his way of life.

Kyuukoku ni kajin ari 窮谷有佳人



There are quite a few dots in this work. Each dot is so strong and deep in the paper that it is radiant in the negative space. On the whole, some sharp straight lines are pleasant with a lot of characters that consist of many curves. There is a synergy between the straight and curved lines.

A letter 葉子屋三十郎宛書簡



In Ryoukan's calligraphy, forms are simplified as much as possible. In one character “白 *haku*,” it seems that a horizontal line is almost missing. His works represent his spirituality. He was a learned monk and lived a very simple life. He never asked for fame or honor. He had no possessions. He was free from restrictions and lived to be true to himself. His works are filled with easiness and composure, however, there is no looseness or dullness or slackness. His works are full of life.

Appreciating Ryoukan's works, we feel as if we were looking at music. His works represent beauty of serenity, simplicity, and enlightenment. The synergy of positive and negative space is beautiful. Each of his lines is strong, sharp, and strict. So are the dots, which are like rocks in the sea and also like the lights of lighthouses on the rocks. The whole of his works are free, soft, graceful, flexible, and warm like a butterfly in the spring wind. His positive and negative space creates mysterious harmony.

. Japanese calligraphy and other Japanese cultures

In Ryoukan's works, the conflict of black and white is weakened and creates harmony because of the synergy of positive and negative space. It produces continuity and expansion. Negative space in Japanese calligraphy is called *ma*. It is interesting to note that in Japanese houses there are *ma of Buddha*, which means the room where the family altar is placed, and *ma of zashiki*, which is translated as a guest room in English. There are also

*ma of oku*, and *ma of mise*. In Japanese houses the rooms are neither isolated nor independent, there is continuity and expansion. When sliding doors are removed, a wide space is made, and the wide space opens onto the garden and nature. There is much in common in the Japanese house and calligraphy concerning space.

In order to produce the synergy of positive and negative space, balance is important. It is interesting to note that there is a lot in common among Japanese gardens, flower arrangements, and calligraphy. For the design of a garden, conformity to the phenomena of nature is the most essential. For example, the distribution of stones and rocks shouldn't be arranged mechanically. Mechanical symmetry is avoided, and variation is sought after instead. However, there should be balance in the variation. The stepping stones are carefully arranged in an irregular but balanced way, where in the West mechanical symmetry is favored and is seen in gardens and flower arrangements.

In calligraphy mechanical symmetry is also avoided, and variation is aimed at instead, like the stepping stones in a garden. Black and white have the power to elicit the full richness of the universe. One of the beauties of calligraphy lies not only in the positive space but also in the negative space. The elegance in the proportion of negative space in a given framework is valued as highly as the brush strokes. One of the keys to beauty in Japanese calligraphy is how to create movement in the negative space. However, the negative space can only be created by the writer's spirit of life.

The negative space is not an empty space but rather it contains strength and insistence. How to interpret the space is left to the observer, which I think leads to *yoin* (a reverberation in the sense of an overtone; resonance) and Japanese silence which tends to speak for itself.

That Japanese *yoin* and silence have deep meaning can be explained taking a scene from a movie about a man suffering from a terminal disease, as one example among many. The man decides to construct a park for children before his death. In the last scene of the movie, the man is alone sitting on a swing in the just-completed park. Nothing can

be heard, except for the gentle sound of the metal-on-metal ticking of the swing. As the camera closes in on the man, it brings a lump to our throat, our eyes begin to glisten, and our nose begins to sting. No one can deny that this scene leaves us warm and choked up. "Because of the skill of the camera work, the gentle, barely audible sound of the swing becomes, on the deep emotional level of the human experience, the thundering peal of a massive bell" (Keene, p.59).

It is often said that Japanese don't try to eliminate ambiguity from their speech, and that they explain a situation about 60-70%, leaving the remainder to the listener's imagination, while people in the West, especially Americans, prefer a direct way of speaking. Japanese silence has meaning like the negative space in calligraphy. The Japanese personality and calligraphy have much in common.

The concept of synergy of positive and negative space in Japanese calligraphy can be seen in many aspects of Japanese culture.

## Conclusion

The beauty of Japanese calligraphy lies in the synergy of positive and negative space, a simple harmony that can be seen in many aspects of Japanese culture. Black and white has the power to convey profound depth and meaning and the full richness of the universe.

The synergy is produced by such things as quality of line, structure, balance, and rhythm and it can be created by a writer's whole essence. The synergy can't be created only through training and skill. A writer's whole being—experience, spirituality, and way of life—is reflected in the calligraphy. Spirit can create beautiful synergy and masterpieces.

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## 書における白と黒の共鳴

中 島 友 子

書は、簡素な芸術である故に豊富な表現が可能である。書は文学であり音楽であり絵画である。書の美しさは、構成、線質、墨色等によるが、最も大切なのは、白と黒の調和であり、共鳴である。書かれた文字が、厚みや深みのある白、主張をぬり込めた白、さわやかな暖かさのある白、潔い白、みずみずしい白等の空間を持って、真の書となる。

良寛、白隠等の作品を取り上げ、白と黒の共鳴から生まれる書の美しさを例証する。書は書き手の全人格を映し出す。書の美しさは、形式的に頭でつくりあげられるものではなく内なる命の躍動によって生じるものである。

書における「白」「余白」「間」の概念は、日本家屋や庭園、日本人の沈黙や余韻にみられ、日本文化の特質といえる。