

# A Comparative Study of Two Different Artistic Traditions: The Art of Calligraphy in China and Pakistan

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## Abstract

China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a framework of national regional connectivity, and its prime concern is to develop economies of both countries. There is no gainsaying that this social, economic and cultural intercourse between two distinctive geographical regions, cultures and religions will draw far-reaching impact mainly on Pakistani ways of life. China has the biggest irreligious population, while Pakistan represents strict Islamic religious values and norms. Because of the CPEC Project, cultural friction due to Chinese influx in Pakistan might occur. Considering the great probability of cultural friction, this study endeavors to explore possibilities for the cultural intercourse of two opposite cultural traditions. This paper focuses on the common artistic tradition of calligraphy art in Pakistan and China. The study put the Pakistani or Islamic calligraphy in comparison with the historic Chinese calligraphy and analyses their philosophical and aesthetic approaches, tangible artistic expressions, cultural mindset and tools and materials used in both respected traditions. It endeavors to explore the differences and commonalities of two different forms of the art of calligraphy, which may help us to enhance our understanding of academic, cultural and regional knowledge, and artistic traditions of two different nations with opposite aesthetic, social and spiritual traditions.

**Keywords:** *Calligraphy, Chinese Art, Islamic Art, Islamic Calligraphy, Chinese Calligraphy, Traditional Art, CPEC, Chinese Culture, Pakistani Culture, Pakistani Art, Syncretic Culture, Syncretism.*

## Introduction

China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a framework of national regional connectivity, and its prime concern is to develop economies of both countries. There is no denial of this that social, economic and cultural intercourse between two distinctive geographical regions, cultures and religions with two different ideologies or approaches towards life will draw far-reaching impact mainly on Pakistani ways of life. Albeit, both traditions of calligraphy have different forms, languages and the related scripts, however, this paper focuses on the common artistic tradition of calligraphy art in Pakistan and China. The study put the tradition of calligraphy in Pakistan, which is predominately the form of Islamic calligraphy, in comparison with the historic Chinese

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calligraphy and analyses their philosophical and aesthetic approaches, tangible artistic expressions, cultural mindset and tools and materials used in both traditions. It endeavors to explore the differences and common features of two different forms of the art of calligraphy. It may enhance our understanding of academic, cultural and regional knowledge, and artistic traditions. The study also scrutinizes how modernity has cut across aesthetic values and principles of both forms of the traditional art of calligraphy in two different localities.

Pakistan is an overwhelmingly a monolithic Muslim society emerged on the world canvas in 1947 as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In the Islamic culture of the country, Islamic calligraphy is one of the most popular forms of art. This respected art form deals with the beautiful writing of the sacred text of the Holy Quran, while Arabic is the language and the script of the divine book (Fig: 1). Significance of the Quran is undeniable for the Islamic *Sharia* (doctrine) is primarily based on the Quranic text. Learn the text of Quran orally, and not as written one, has invariably been cherished by the Muslims. The very word “*al-Quran*” is an Arabic verbal noun meaning, “to recite, read aloud.” The desire to preserve the Quranic text intact resulted into a discipline known in Arabic as “*ilm al-qiraat*,” or the “science of recitation.” To memorize the Quranic text has been one of the most favorite practices of Islam. Historically, the oral/aural means of transmission of divine knowledge did not affect the importance of written words. In several places, the Quran refers to itself as “*kitab*” which means “writing” or “book”. The Quran also mentions the word “*al-Qalam*,” meaning the “pen”. There is a *surah* (chapter) of the Quran entitled *al-Qalam*, which advices the followers to write down the deals and agreements that you have between each other. Muslims believe that the earthly Quran is a manifestation of God’s heavenly scripture preserved for eternity. In Islam, the tradition of writing was venerated and nurtured by the Prophet Muhammad himself as he had a team of writers whose job was to write down each verse as it was being revealed to him. Ali, cousin and son-in-law, is considered to be the “first mater calligrapher” of early years of Islam (Schimmel 2000, p. 20). Accordingly, considering a perpetual danger with oral transmission, Muslims began to transcribe the revelations in order to preserve the sacred text. Due to the exalted status of the Quran, historically, special attention was paid to the production, illumination, decoration and displays of the Quran manuscripts. However, due to its association with the written word of God, calligraphy is deemed the highest form of art.

### Chinese Calligraphy

On the other hand, the Communists laid foundation of the modern or the People Republic of China in 1949. The Chinese cultural life has manifested a standard language with a different script and a family of arts. The standard language called “Chinese” or “Mandarin,” which is spoken by more than 1.2 billion people. The Chinese language has developed its own script for the writing purpose. Interestingly this script has no alphabet, rather the language is written in characters, which are pictographic symbols. The art family comprises painting, calligraphy, sculpture, poetry, dance and opera. Amongst all these art forms, the art of calligraphy stand out as quintessence of the Chinese culture. Like the Chinese language and script, the art of calligraphy has also flourished for several thousand years. Chinese calligraphy was originally meant to create images that represent objects in the real world. But this ancient practice of the making of pictographic symbols (Fig: 2) was

changed into nonpictographic signs as early as in the Shell and Bone Script and then by an overall abstraction of the writing system through the Clerical transformation in the Han dynasty (Li 2009, p. 196). The traditional Chinese calligraphy may be defined as, it is the art of writing Chinese characters using a Chinese brush. Nevertheless, over the practice of millennia, this art form has developed its own principles of aesthetics profoundly based on the traditional Chinese cultural mindset, rooted deeply in classical philosophical ideologies of Confucius (551-479 BC) and Lao Zi, the founder of Taoism. In the realm of arts and aesthetics, both schools of Confucianism and Taoism emphasize mainly the exploration of spiritual beauty. According to Chen Tingyou (2003, p. 80), the Confucian school believes that ‘the art can mold a person’s temperament and educate a person in aesthetics ...’ The Taoism advocates as, ‘aesthetics should be separate from concrete practice...’ and the ‘real beauty should be natural and exist in a spiritual realm free from outside shackles’ (Tingyou 2003, p.81). The common aesthetic outlook of both schools, achievement of the eternal beauty is the goal demonstrated in calligraphy and other art forms of China. In artistic sense, spiritual beauty may be seen in the following three aspects: simplicity, momentum, as well as rhythm, and moderation (Tingyou 2003, pp.81-88; Jin 2017, p. 3).

### Islamic Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics

Regarding the Islamic philosophy of arts and aesthetics, Ali said: “The beauty of writing is the tongue of the hand and the elegance of thought”. It is also commonly understood that the ‘God is beautiful, and He loves beauty’. Speaking philosophically, both Pakistani or the Islamic, and the Chinese artistic traditions are seekers of the beauty alike, though approaching differently. As the Chinese genius look for the spiritual beauty in the nature while the Islamic intellect considering the God, an Absolute form of beauty, try to achieve it through decoration, illumination, and the calligraphy of the divine text. The abstraction and the art of calligraphy of either words or characters becomes one of the common features in both cultures, nevertheless, the content of the Islamic calligraphy is certainly religious, in contrast to the Chinese, which is mostly secular. Before I get on to do formal comparisons of both respected traditions of calligraphy, let me first outline briefly how the great Chinese invention of paper had contributed towards the Islamic intellectual concerns and artistic pursuits of the Divine beauty.

Jonathan M. Bloom (2001, pp. 32-45) believes that the Chinese anecdote of Cai Lun’s invention of paper, also known as “Zhi of Cai Lun,” remains a convenient metaphor for the underlying truth that paper began to be used for writing in early second-century China. Likewise, the story that the Muslim soldiers captured the Chinese papermakers, at the battle of Talas, now called Kyrgyzstan, in 751, also metaphorically describes how paper was introduced to the Islamic lands.

The invention of paper was a great contribution to the history of human civilization, yet this invaluable invention could not contribute as per its potential until it remained restricted to its homeland. The diffusion of paper into Islamic territories engendered a revolution, especially, in socio-intellectual lives of both the Islam and the Muslims. The first papermaking factory was established in Samarqand in 751, and the second factory was set up in 793 by the Caliph Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad. At earlier bureaucratic necessities may have led Muslim officials to adopt paper, and as a result, it began to use regularly in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Bloom 2001, pp. 35-36).

The advent of paper or the papermaking technique to the Muslim world brought many changes in book production. The cheapest and readily availability of paper (*waraq*, *kaghaz*<sup>1</sup>), another writing support, gradually replaced the traditional surfaces like parchment (*raqq*, *riqq* or *jild*)<sup>2</sup>, papyrus (*qirtas*)<sup>3</sup> and thin stones. The great advantage of the paper over all other supports was that it could absorb ink, and it could not easily be eradicated from paper as compared to papyrus and parchment. In order to make paper worthy of fine calligraphy, the size (*ahar*), starch-based substance was used which enabled the surface to absorb ink as required. Despite the introduction of paper, parchment remained common for the Quran manuscripts until the eleventh century. With the passage of time, the paper became a source of the Muslim communal identity as opposed to the Jews and Christians who used parchment for copies of the Torah and the Bible. During the early centuries after the arrival of paper to Islamic lands, papyrus was deemed inappropriate to receive divine revelations for its closely association with the bureaucracy and the profane (Bloom 2001, p. 104). Yet because there was no other writing support available better than the Chinese paper and considering the utmost need, its use had become inevitable which in turn engendered to develop the new scripts and to give new life to the Islamic artistic aptitude for all visual art forms. Especially in terms of the Islamic calligraphy, the old Kufic style<sup>4</sup> began to develop into new idioms as per dynamics of the new changing artistic and socio-intellectual milieus of the late eight- and the early ninth-century Islamic territories. The earliest of these styles are known as Qaramatian Kufic, broken Kufic, eastern Kufic, Kufic-*naskhi*, New Style and *warraq* (stationer's) script or broken cursive etc. Most scholars have tried to explain the emergence of the new script as a logical outgrowth of earlier Kufic scripts used for transcribing the Quran (Safadi 1992, p.19; Mansour 2011, pp. 38-39). But Jonathan Bloom (2001), says that 'it was developed by professional secretaries and copyists who regularized the cursive styles of handwriting they used for copying documents on to paper ...' (p. 104). It was the paper, and of course, the thirst for the abstract beauty that enabled the medieval Islamic calligraphers to develop the *sittah* or six major cursive scripts – *Sulus*, *Naskhi*, *Muhaqqaq*, *Rayhani*, *Riqa* and *Tawqi* (Fig: 3). Abu Ali Ibn Muqla (886-940), following Al-Razi (c. 854-925 or 935) and Ibn al-Haytham's (c. 956-1039) philosophy of '*al-tanasub wa l-i tilaf*' or 'proportionality and harmony',<sup>5</sup> was able to create the system of '*al-Khatt al-Mansub*' meaning 'the proportioned writing', which lead him to invent the rules of writing of six scripts and to give the letters a geometric cast (George 2010, pp. 108-114). As a result, he created six elegant styles of Arabic writing, which proved to be the foundation of the Islamic calligraphy in the centuries to come. Less than a century later, Abul Hasan Ali Ibn Hilal (d. 1022 Or 1031), better known as Ibn al-Bawwab, contributed to the artistic element and brought the styles of writing to perfection. In the same vein, Yaqut al-Mustasimi (d. 1298), also known as *Qiblat al-Kuttab* (The Polestar of calligraphers), changed the rules by replacing the straight-cut nib of calligrapher's *qalam* (pen) with an oblique cut, which Ibn al-Bawwab did not do, to enhance the beauty of calligraphy to next level.

### Origin of Islamic Calligraphy:

The Islamic calligraphy is certainly related to the sacred text of the Quran, written in the Arabic language. Without getting into the debate that the Arabic script is derived from either Nabatean or Syriac writing, it was modified and adopted by the Persians, Turks and Indians or presently South Asian Muslims. This new script is called *Nastaliq*, a Perso-Arabic script, used



Fig. 1: Twenty-eight alphabets of Arabic script.

Picture	Evolution	Modern character	English	
	→	→	→	sun
	→	→	→	moon
	→	→	→	tree
	→	→	→	mountain
	→	→	→	water
	→	→	→	field
	→	→	→	door

Fig. 2: The evolution of the Chinese pictographic characters (script).

		Ligature	Alphabets
<i>Muhaqqaq</i>	<i>Sulus</i>	لجم	ل + ج + م
		مجم	م + ج + م
<i>Rayhan</i>	<i>Naskh</i>	نجم	ن + ج + م
<i>Tawqi</i>	<i>Riqa</i>		

Fig. 4: Arabic alphabets join to form ligature.

Fig. 3: Sittah or sic styles of writing the Arabic script invented by Ibn Muqla.

for the writing of many different languages. Most probably this is the power of the Arabic culture or the script that some new traditions of calligraphy using the Perso-Arabic, non-Islamic or secular scripts, representing the indigenous or non-Arab or *Ajami* aesthetics, emerged. These scripts have certain number of alphabets, phonetic system, and of course, aesthetic values as per cultural requirements. Albeit the Nastaliq is also a part of contemporary calligraphy in Pakistan, but this paper certainly does not encompass that of non-Islamic, secular or non-Arabic script. The study would rather concentrate on purely the Arabic script for the comparison of two great forms of the art of calligraphy. It would help us understand the social, cultural and religious dynamics of Pakistan as the Nastaliq or the non-Islamic script has also laid its artistic foundation on the established Islamic calligraphy.

### Arabic Scripts Writing Styles:

The Arabic language has twenty-eight phonemes or different sounds, but the Arabic script uses only eighteen letters to represent them. Some extra strokes or diacritical marks are used to distinguish between phonemes sharing the same letter shapes. For instance, the letters *ba*, *ta*, *nun* and *ya* share the generic letter shape, but can be differentiated from each other by one, two or three strokes or dots (*nuqta*) above or below the line. There was no tradition of using punctuation marks until modern times.

The Arabic script uses only a cursive form for all styles of writing, except the classical angular Kufic. As opposite to other scripts of English, Greek or Latin, Arabic alphabets are written joining each other without space. Many of these letters are connected by ligature. In a ligature, the letters themselves may change their forms, depending on their positions in a word (Fig: 4). There are four different possible forms: the first, the same letter can have one form when it stands alone; the second, at the beginning of a word; the third, in the middle of a word; and the fourth, at the end of a word. So, in other words, every ligature varies in form and size. Each letter or ligature is formed by arranging one or multiple strokes. Unlike the Chinese basic eight strokes, the nature of the Arabic script is such that it provides the calligraphers with dots, vertical lines, horizontal lines, squares, circles, ovals, loops, entwining and interlacing shafts and graceful curvature. In writing, letters and/or ligatures are arranged in a linear order to form words and text. The same letter repeated in a word will not be written in a similar manner rather it will carry entirely different shape.

### Chinese Language Creation

In case of Chinese, the creation of language is considered as the creation of characters. The distinguishing aspect of the Chinese writing is that characters are not constructed from letters such as those in Arabic but from basic units called “strokes.” A stroke is a dot or continuous line of writing, made from beginning to end without any intentional break. In Arabic, which is an alphabetic language, letters are arranged in linear order, e.g. from right to left, to form words, nevertheless, in Chinese, strokes of various shapes are assembled in a two-dimensional space to form characters. Unlike words, the strokes do not correspond to sounds, nor do they carry meaning rather they are basic elements used to build up characters. The number of Arabic ligatures and the

Chinese characters are in thousands. The character is more complicated in structure than the ligature. The word is an Arabic linguistic unit while ligature may be called a unit of the Islamic calligraphy or Arabic writing. Chinese characters are the written signs or symbols, each functioning roughly, as a single word does in Arabic. Like Arabic words, there are thousands of characters in Chinese writing. Due to a very small number of strokes, as compared to letters, their frequency of use is high. According to Tingyou (2003), as meaning symbols, the characters have to be different enough for visual decoding, therefore, they cannot all be simple in structure. Some are relatively simple with a small number of strokes, while others can be quite complex with more than twenty or even thirty strokes. Each character has a unique structure. The strokes making up these characters can be arranged from a top to bottom, left to right, or even a more complex configuration, which lends more options to a calligrapher as compared to the Arabic calligraphy that has the only choice of linear composition of words. Chinese characters are square, and each occupies a square space on paper, however, the Arabic words, depending upon their form and number, changes shapes from circle or oval to mostly horizontal rectangle. Mostly dozen strokes are used to form a character, but there are eight basic strokes: dot, horizontal stroke, turning stroke, vertical stroke, hook stroke, right-upward stroke, left-downward stroke and right-downward stroke. They may be best demonstrated using the character *yong* (Fig: 5) as per formal script.

### Islamic Calligraphic Standards

Like Chinese calligraphy, there are certain principles of Islamic calligraphy to achieve the standard of the beauty of writing. In the Islamic tradition of calligraphy, a keen observation is important, as one must look at each letter, word and dot carefully with critical eyes. One must consider the points of strength and delicacy of the letters, their basic shapes such as circles and ovals, ascent and descent of the *qalam* and flourishes. After observing a letter carefully, practice replicating the same letter with *qalam*. To join two or more two letters, two words or a sentence is called composition. The process of arranging a piece of writing involves two techniques called baseline (*kursi*) and proportionality (*nisbat*). The *kursi* is an Arabic word, literally meaning a ‘footstool’ or ‘chair’, provides a baseline to most syllables in the linear setting of words or a sentence. The inter-relation or proportion (*nisbat*) in the calligraphic sense means the harmony of design of the fundamentals of letters and the relation of the actual script to the empty space on paper (Rahman 1979, p. 15; Shaghil 1987, pp. 67-68). The proportion system of dots in various Islamic scripts is followed to ensure constant size and shape of letters and to bring harmonious effect in writing (Fig: 6). Like in Chinese calligraphy too, every character is composed within a square space on paper.<sup>6</sup> There is a variety of grid patterns – eight-cell grid and nine-cell grid etc. – that are used to divide the space for a character horizontally and vertically. Grids are also used for learning purposes (Fig: 7). ‘In general, mathematical theory is abstract but profoundly reflects the relations between space and mathematics’ (Tingyou 2003, p. 12). The Chinese calligraphy has developed disciplines of aesthetics, as in order to create a beautiful piece of writing, visual balance, strict proportions for the management of spaces, and harmony are common elements of the aesthetic beauty.

There are four treasures of study according to the Chinese tradition of writing, which are in proper order, brush, ink, paper and ink stone (Fig: 8). On the other hand, reed pen (*qalam*), penknife, ink, inkpot (*dawat*) and paper are the basic instruments required for the Islamic calligraphy



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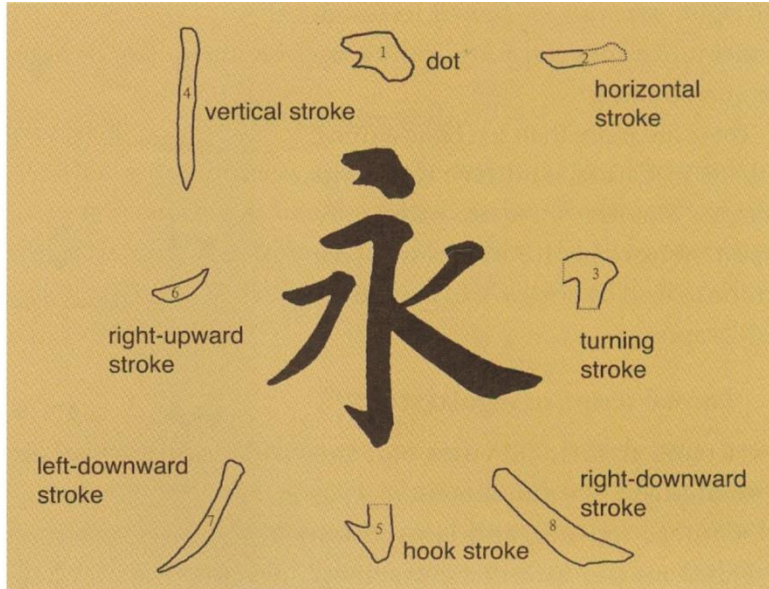


Fig. 5: Eight basic strokes of the Chinese calligraphy.



Fig. 6: The dot-based proportional system in the Islamic calligraphy.

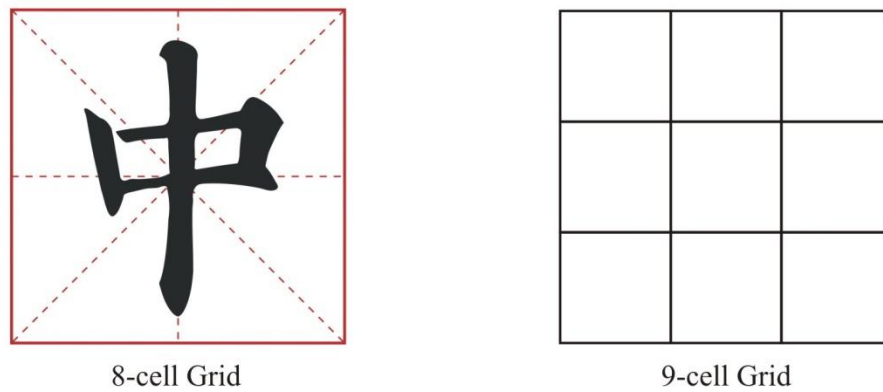


Fig. 7: Grid system is used to write the Chinese characters in square space.

(Fig: 9). In both traditions of the Islamic and the Chinese, almost all basic tools and materials of calligraphy may be considered parallel to each other. Interestingly, these are all preferred to be made of organic material. There are small differences, which elaborate the varying nature of both traditions. Generally, both instruments of calligraphy – the Chinese brush and the Islamic *qalam* – have their own aesthetic and artistic values and significance in producing the visual beauty of particular tradition. Earliest brush was found in the fifth century BC, yet Chinese history of calligraphy reflects consecutive efforts made to develop instruments. For instance, around fourteen centuries ago, an old woman in southern China was trying to invent a brush with a newborn's hair inside and rabbit's hair outside (Tingyou 2003, p. 38), when the divine text was being revealed on the Prophet Muhammad. Usually, the tuft of the brush is made of animal hairs such as goats, weasels, rabbits and horses. Sometime, mixed hairs are more versatile and used for several different tasks. There are four qualities of Chinese writing brushes: 1) the tip of the brush could display the delicate changes of strokes; 2) its smooth end hairs could make writing vigorous while it spread across the paper; 3) its cone shape could make it easy to move in all directions; and 4) it is durable, and keep its elasticity and softness longer (Tingyou 2003, p. 38).

The Islamic *qalam* is made of reed. The Arabic word “*qalam*” comes from Greek “*Kalamos*,” as before Islam, reed pens were used in Greek, Coptic, CPA and Hebrew (George 2010, p. 49). The knife is used for cutting the *qalam*. To cut the reed, the knife is applied to the contagious part to the tip of the pen. Make both sides of the reed equal, and then split the *qatt* (nib) with knife generally into two equal parts. Finally, the *qatt* may be made by cutting the point of the nib in different ways e.g. oblique, even, upright and inclined; nevertheless, the best is the oblique one with a medium slant. One of the most distinctive features is the difference between the Islamic *qalam*, with hard, stiff and flat tapering nib, and the Chinese brush, with soft, flexible and round or pointed tip. The Chinese brush, due to its softness and elasticity, has been able to demonstrate specific artistic values that nurture the individual expression more than the *qalam*. The method of handling brush or *qalam* is different in both traditions. The brush should be held vertically at 90 degrees to the paper's surface while writing a character; whereas slant or diagonal position of the *qalam* at approximately 45 degrees is recommended in Islamic calligraphy (Fig: 9).

### Material in Islamic and Chinese Traditions

In the Islamic tradition, usually black is used as ink for the calligraphy of the sacred text. Golden is also used but occasionally. Blue and gold are mostly used for illumination purposes. Golden is produced by crushing gold leaf in a vessel, and then it is mixed with gum and water. Blue is made of lazulite or lazuli mixed with the same water and gum. Traditionally black ink is obtained from the lampblack after a lengthy procedure. According to another recipe, starchy ink was prepared by baking wheat starch into a copper pot. When starch turned into black, it was mixed with gallnut water and alum and then was boiled to prepare finally (Rahman 1979, pp. 18-20). Presently, industrial made ink in liquid form is available in different colors. Ink is kept in a *dawat* (inkpot), made of glass, porcelain or metal. Some undressed silk fibers or a piece of rag or soft sponge, sufficiently large to absorb nearly all ink, should be placed in the inkpot. This not only stops clots of ink being taken up into the *qalam* but prevents the *qalam* itself from being



Fig. 8: Brush, ink and ink slab [left] and the method of handling the brush [right] for the Chinese calligraphy.



Fig. 9: Reed-pen, ink, inkpot and knife [left] and method of handling *qalam* and technique of *qalam*-making [right] in Islamic calligraphy.

damaged by contact with the bottom of the inkpot. Ink is taken into the *qalam* by simply pressing it on the saturated silk or sponge.

Like the Islamic ink, the Chinese ink stick is also made of the soot of Tung oil, coal or pinewood, animal glue and perfume. In Islamic tradition the ink is preserved in liquid form, whereas the Chinese ink is available in solid forms of rectangle or round cakes and sticks. The ink is prepared by rubbing the ink stick on an ink slab with a little water. The ink slab or ink stone is the replacement of the Islamic inkpot. Ink slabs are available in a variety of materials such as stone, porcelain, pottery, bronze and iron ink slabs etc. Functionally, apart from the surface on which an ink stick can be ground into ink, it is used as a container for holding ink, a paperweight, a decorative piece of an art, depending on its quality and design, and even as a collector's item. The surface of ink stone should not be too smooth or too coarse, and the stone should not be too porous as well. There is no need to put fiber or sponge in it as opposed to Islamic inkpot. In Islamic calligraphy, usually the ink (or the text) is simply black without any tonal difference. It is very rare that the text is written in any other color or gold. While to a layperson in China, ink may be black, but to an artist, there are many colors and different shades of blackness (thin or thick ink). They intentionally use runnier or thicker ink to express ideas or feelings in writing. For example, ink made for fatter or bolder characters are used to represent heavy ideas or thoughts, while light and thin characters are written with less ink to express lofty vision and ideals (Li 2009, p. 24; Peveto 2010, p. 44). According to the Islamic tradition, the text is written in black and variant colors are used to illuminate the divine manuscripts, which is merely an act of devotion. In China, by contrast, the art of calligraphy is considered very effective medium to express the feelings of an individual.

The paper was invented in China, but it has played indispensable role in the development of both tradition of the Chinese and the Islamic calligraphy. There is a great difference between the kinds of paper required for both traditions of calligraphy. Wendan Li (2009, p. 25) elaborates on the qualities of the presently available paper required for the Chinese calligraphy. Such as coarse-textured and absorbent paper is generally considered best for calligraphy. In the province of Anhui, paper is made of an organic material of rice called Xuan paper. It is made white and fragile, usually in good quality surface tension, and cannot be torn easily. Yet it may be saved for a long time. Considering its absorbent quality, this paper is always good for producing a variety of visual effects created through the artistic interplay of ink and brush.

But in contrast, a smooth, shiny, glaze and impermeable surface, which has almost no tensile strength is considered the best for the Islamic calligraphy. It is a kind of surface on which the *qalam* allows the thick ink, as against the Chinese brush with watery ink, to spread to the area that calligrapher wants to. As per practice of the Medieval Islamic calligraphers, rough and absorbent surface of the paper had to be sized to make it worthy of fine calligraphy. Accordingly, a starch-based substance, usually a mixture of rice powder with egg white and other ingredients, was applied properly to the paper surface to prevent the ink from penetrating the fibers. Then the paper was rubbed or burnished with a burnisher, made of stone, wood or an oyster or mussel-shell, to make it smooth (Blair 2006, pp. 43-49; Rahman 1979, pp. 20-21). Currently the art-card or art-paper is deemed better for writing with the *qalam*.

In both traditions, master-apprentice system is used for learning. Accordingly, master's writing sample is copied again and again to get to perfection, even repetition is favored over innovation. The master is highly respected by pupils. Usually, it takes years to get acquainted with any specific idiom of calligraphy. A calm and relaxed mind; correct sitting posture and profound concentration on the task at hand; coordination of mind and body; and a great level of patience are also common features required for learning and practice. Above all, every principle of writing, traditional tools and materials as well as techniques and methods are supposed to be followed as per tradition (Peveto 2010, pp. 43-44).

### **Modernity in both Traditions**

The process of modernization seriously affects the traditional calligraphy in both localities of Pakistan and China equally. With the dawn of the twentieth century, alongside the changes happened in all spheres of life, the impact of the Western influence may also be seen on the traditional Chinese calligraphy. Most important was the introduction of the hard-tipped pen that altogether changed the writing habit of people. It was, probably, for the first time ever in the history of the Chinese calligraphy that the so-called “Islamic fountain pens”<sup>7</sup> and the “Western ballpoint pens” have replaced the traditional brush, which was the hallmark of the Chinese calligraphy. By the twenty-first century, the new form had become so popular, versatile and vital that the Hard Pen Calligraphy emerged as a new genre of the Chinese calligraphy.

Two other movements of the Modernist and the Avant-Garde appeared during the last couple of decades of the twentieth century in Modern China. For the development and relevance of traditional calligraphy in modern times, the artists believed that rigorous rules had to be broken to give way to new creative expressions. Traditional methods, materials and scales were changed, and different media and techniques were experienced. Using traditional instruments, modernists also applied innovative brush and ink methods, and treatment of paper for various effects. Some Avant-Garde artists even went further. Drawings of the experimental calligraphers of Japan and Taiwan, the Abstract Expressionists of 1950s, 1960s and the contemporary Western art inspired them, and they as a result, took the Chinese calligraphy in the directions of conceptualism and abstraction. The Avant-Gardists argued that as the calligraphy is the art of drawing the lines, so it's not at all important to write it in the form of characters. This artistic philosophy provided them an opportunity to create a body of work which manifested distorted Chinese characters. Accordingly, ink and brush strokes were used to draw different shapes without linguistic meanings. On the other hand, the traditionalists encountered the so-called New Calligraphy saying that Chinese calligraphy represents the spirit of Chinese culture and aesthetics. The life of art would be in great danger with the decline of the aesthetic spirit and the loss of principles. So, the works of Avant-Garde calligraphers were referred to as ‘modern’, ‘anticalligraphy’, ‘noncalligraphy’, ‘destruction of calligraphy’, and ‘New Calligraphism’ (Li 2009, pp. 190-191). On the other hand, the traditionalists have never accepted any new calligraphic form, yet many a contemporary Chinese calligrapher, mostly trained by the



Fig. 11: Modern Islamic calligraphy by Pakistani calligrapher Hanif Ramay.



Fig. 12: Contemporary Water Calligraphy in China.



Fig. 10: Wu (Void) by Harrison Xinshi Tu.

Western art academia and the Chinese calligraphers who live and work in the West, such as Harrison Xinshi Tu (Fig: 10) and Xu Bing are contributing towards the creation of a universal visual language with the cross-pollination of the ideals of the Chinese and the Western arts for the new millennium (Li 2009, pp. 192-195).

Likewise, the Islamic calligraphy also departed from its traditional outlook with the introduction of the Western brush, media and techniques. In Pakistan, Hanif Ramay and Anwar Jalal Shemza began experimenting in the mid-fifties with calligraphic art, and by the mid-seventies, the emergent new form of art reached its zenith (Fig: 11). Marcella Nesom Sirhandi (1992, pp. 78-79) views ‘this art as a result of a conscious concern or prescribed policy of Islamization; a form of natural progression in the work of some painters; and an episode of the international Islamic calligraphic art movement of 1950s and 1960s’ in Iran, Egypt and Turkey etc. The calligraphic art was celebrated popularly, and at state level, due to an emotional, devotional and historical association of the newly born Islamic nation to the Islamic calligraphy. Like the Chinese Avant-Garde artists, Pakistani modern artists were also could not be without inspiring from the works of Picasso, Jackson Pollock and William de Coning. So, principles of the greatly revered traditional Islamic calligraphy were broken, and the Western brush and canvas replaced the Islamic *qalam* and paper. Modern artists adapted material, techniques and methods of Western oil painting. In contrast to the Chinese Modernist and the Avant-Garde artists’ aesthetic aspirations, Pakistan’s modern art of Islamic calligraphy manifests the profound religious and devotional concerns. However, the traditional calligraphers, the custodians of the tradition of Islamic or the Quranic calligraphy, criticized severely and called this new calligraphy art form as ‘*Khat-e Jahanumi*’, literally the ‘script of hell’.

Finally, according to both traditions of writing, the art of calligraphy has profound relationships between general health and personality building. Aesthetic principles directly deal with balance, harmony and composition, sensibility and the beauty of the strokes try to arouse the aesthetic consciousness which in turn contributes to grooming of a personality. Previously in China, an artist who was good at poetry, calligraphy and painting was called a ‘person with three wonderful talents’ (Tingyou 2003, p. 12). This traditional understanding is carried on even in modern China. It is believed that a person’s handwriting reveals education, self-discipline and personality. A person’s learning is judged, at least in part, by his or her handwriting. A scholar’s essay, however wise, is considered poor if the handwriting is inferior. Presently in China, a new form of writing called ‘ground calligraphy’ or ‘water calligraphy’ is practiced by old and young, male and female, who gather in parks or even on sidewalks to do morning exercise (Fig: 12). Medical research has indicated that regular, sustained practice of calligraphy may improve body functions and thus be a good way to keep fit (Li 2009, pp. 13-15). Similarly, in Islamic societies of South Asia, as according to Ehsan Ahmed, a retired schoolteacher in the Punjab, Pakistan, relates the handwriting with the moral behavior of students of this generation. He says that just a generation ago, the acquaintance of good penmanship was considered as *turra-e imtiaz* (hallmark of personage) of the *nastaliq shakhsiyat* (sober and sophisticated persona or the state of being). But at present, the modern western methods of education have replaced the traditional *qalam* with ballpoint or pencil, which are causing to spoil the moral behaviors and personalities of students.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *Kaghaz* – is the first Arabic word for paper derived from Soghdian and Uyghur words, which are commonly thought to derive in turn from the Chinese word *gu-zhi*, meaning ‘paper made from paper-mulberry (bark).’
- <sup>2</sup> In early Islamic times the material used to make codices was parchment referring to the skin of various animals such as goat, calf, donkey and gazelle, however, the most common was sheep.
- <sup>3</sup> *Qirtas* – is an Arabic word, which may have derived from the Greek ‘*chartas*’ for paper.
- <sup>4</sup> *Kufic* – An earlier form of an angular script that was used to write the Quranic manuscripts. It is named after the city of Kufa, a cantonment region of the Islamic armies, established by the second Caliph Omar.
- <sup>5</sup> According to Alain George, Plato, Pythagorean, Jabirian and al-Kindi’s ideologies about art, music, arithmetic and geometry, influenced Al-Razi and Ibn al-Haytham’s philosophies.
- <sup>6</sup> Please note that characters only take up about 80 percent of the square space, however, the remaining 20 percent space is called ‘breathing space’ between the characters. For a beginner, the square space may be divided into a square grid, eight-cell pattern that divides character space like a pie, and nine-cell grid.
- <sup>7</sup> According to Blair (2006, p.60), the fountain pen was invented by the court goldsmith following the instructions of the Fatimid caliph al-Muizz (r. 953-75), but in the modern times, of course, it has been reintroduced to the world by the West with certain improvisations.

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