


Shodo: An Old and New Form of Self-Expression

Calligraphy done with a brush and *sumi* ink—*shodo*—is a familiar part of Japanese life. Introduced from China around the eighth century, over the centuries shodo evolved in distinctively Japanese ways, becoming firmly rooted in the culture. Many people today aspire to improve their handwriting and take private shodo lessons as well.

Shodo involves not just improvement of technique, but the pursuit of beauty and understanding of the self. It is a pursuit with a long tradition that has won renewed attention today as a means of self-expression.

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Performance Shodo: New Forms of Expression

The activities of high school shodo clubs have drawn interest in recent years for their involvement in “performance shodo.” Some shodo artists have long held demonstrations of their work as a kind of performance, but the performance shodo more recently talked about refers to groups writing song lyrics and other texts on very large sheets of paper to the accompaniment of J-Pop and other music and dance steps. The brushes used in this case are very large, some weighing as much as 10 kilograms when soaked in ink. Wielding a large, heavy brush to brush strokes over a large sheet of paper takes considerable strength, so the activities of some of shodo clubs that engage in performance shodo include physical exercises such as running, push-ups, and training to develop back and abdominal muscles. The attraction of performance shodo, as distinct from the ordinary shodo, in which each person practices with a brush on sheets of shodo paper (*hanshi* 半紙, see Japanese Culture Now-4), is in the process of working together to create a single work.

Performance shodo first came to attention in the media when it was begun more than 10 years ago at a certain high school, and has since spread to high schools all over the country. Featuring plenty of action and dynamic brushwork, these performances have often become part of high school festivals and local events at which the audience as well can enjoy the appeal of the “new shodo.”

Performance Shodo Competitions

In the last few years, a number of competitions for performance shodo have been launched. The performances are judged not only on the qualities of the completed work but on the process

of creating it. So, in addition to shodo technique, the judges consider the manner of expression and content of the message.

The High School Shodo Performance National Championships—popularly known as the Shodo Performance Koshien*—held in the Ehime prefecture city of Shikoku Chuo, began in 2008. Five high schools participated in the second championships held in August 2009. The teams, consisting of about 10 members each, compete by playing a song of their own choice and writing the lyrics on a large 4- by 6- meter sheet of paper. Each team also considers what costumes to wear—traditional *hakama* trousers with kimono, tank tops, polo shirts, and the like—as part of their performance.

Starting in 2009, a national competition has been held called Shodo Girls Koshien on the Nihon Television program “Zoom In!! Super.” The winner of the fourth contest held at New Year’s 2010 was the team of Saitama prefectural Kawaguchi High School, which presented the team members’ own original message (see Meeting People) performed as a team effort.

* Koshien

The name of the stadium where the National High School Baseball Championships are held annually, “Koshien,” has become a generic term for national high school tournaments of many kinds. For more on Koshien, see *Takarabako* No. 23, Japanese Culture Now.

Beginnings of the Shodo Performance Koshien

Shikoku Chuo, Japan’s top paper manufacturing city, was hard hit by the prolonged recession. The girls of the local Ehime Prefectural Mishima High School Shodo Club, wanting to do something to promote the local paper industry and reinvigorate their community, came up with the idea of a Shodo Performance Koshien and then made it happen. The story of the girls’ achievement drew a major response from viewers when it was introduced on a Nihon Television documentary program. That led to the holding of another competition called the “Shodo Girls Koshien.” A film, based on the true story of the efforts of the Mishima High School Shodo Club, “Shodo Girls!! Our Koshien”* was released in May 2010.



© Shodo-Performance High School National Championships Committee

* Shodo Performance Koshien website:
<http://shodo-performance.jp/index.html>



© Shodo-Performance High School National Championships Committee

All Sorts of Expressions



Expressing the Spirit of Words

The shodo artist Takeda Soun (武田双雲) describes his art as the “expression of the ‘spirit of words’ (*kotodama*) with brush and ink.” He has drawn attention for his experimental activities diverging from the usual pattern of shodo masters by giving performances writing large characters and collaborating with artists in music and many other genres.

In his book *Sho no michi o iko* [Let’s Follow the Way of the Brush] (PHP Kenkyujo, 2009), he writes as follows:

“Writing with a brush gives you time to face yourself, and trying to express yourself in this brief form gives you a chance to examine how you feel and think deep inside.”



Takeda Soun gives a shodo performance on stage.

© Soun Office

Eekanji sakuhinshu o-iwai [Commemorative Collection of Eekanji Works by Kunishige Tomomi] (Tokimeki Publishing, 2005).

* Note that the word written 英漢字®, which would ordinarily be pronounced *Ei-Kanji*, is pronounced “Ee-Kanji” to express the sound in Kansai dialect which is homonymous with the words for “good feeling,” which is, in standard Japanese, *ii kanji*.

Writing with the Brush in His Mouth

Makino Fumiyuki (牧野文幸) writes what he is thinking using a brush held in his mouth. After a cervical spine injury suffered in a pool accident as a second-year high school student, Makino lost control of his body from the neck down. While undergoing rehabilitation, with the encouragement of his physical therapist, he learned to draw pictures using a brush held in his mouth.



Makino writes on a paper sheet standing in front of him, balancing the position of the characters in the space.

© JTB

Then he decided to go back to the shodo, which he had studied from the time he was in elementary school. Having learned to write with his mouth, Makino realized that we write less with our hands than with the central axis of our bodies. For that reason, writing with one’s mouth is not as difficult as it may appear to those watching, he says. For Makino, shodo and painting have become his way of participating in society—for him, they are “life itself.”

One of the qualities of shodo that fascinates Makino most is how we can write characters in different styles and modes, according to our own understanding of the meaning of each character. The same characters can be rendered with endlessly different nuances—he loves the infinite variety, freedom of expression, and “anything-goes” aspects of shodo.

英漢字 ええかんじ* English and Kanji

Kunishige Tomomi (國重友美) does shodo works that are kanji composed of strokes that also spell the English word of the same meaning. She developed her art at university after noticing that a calligraphic rendering of the English word “truth” she had written in her notebook looked like the kanji for “真実 *shinjitsu*” (truth). Her works consist of characters like “愛 *ai*” (love) incorporating the letters of the English word love, “道 *michi*” (road) the letters of road, and “海 *umi*” (sea) the letters of sea.



Notice that the character *ai* here is written with strokes that form the letters of the English word “love.”

© Kunishige Tomomi

The works described here can be found in *Kunishige Tomomi*

All Sorts of Competitions

Many shodo competitions are held each year in Japan. One of them is the International High School Shodo Exhibition (“Sho no Koshien” 書の甲子園) held annually for high school students in Japan and overseas. For the 18th contest held in 2009, more than 15,000 entries were submitted from Japan and 24 countries and regions overseas. The majority are entries by high school shodo clubs and other groups, but individuals can also submit entries. The contest awards prizes for individuals as well as groups. Other competitions include the All-Japan High School and University Shodo Exhibit and the All-Japan High School Cultural Festival.

The prize-winning works in the Sho no Koshien can be viewed at the Sho no Koshien website: mainichi.jp/kansai/etc/shodo/2010/thum.html

Character of the Year: Summing Up the Times

Every year in December, the Japanese Kanji Proficiency Society (Nihon Kanji Noryoku Kentei Kyokai) conducts a nationwide survey asking respondents to cite characters they think represent the image of the year. The foundation announces the character chosen most often by respondents as the “kanji of the year 今年の漢字®” in an event held at Kyoto’s Kiyomizu temple. The temple’s head priest is requested to write the chosen kanji on a large sheet of *washi* 和紙 paper, which is then presented as an offering to the temple.

“Kanji of the Year 2009”

shin (new)

Renewal was the theme, with a new party coming to power in Japan and Barack Obama sworn in as president of the United States. Also the year of epidemic outbreaks of H1N1 flu (swine flu), known in Japan as 新型インフルエンザ *shin-gata* (“new-type”) influenza.

新



Head priest of Kiyomizu temple writing the selected character for 2009, “shin” (new), in what has recently become a regular year-end event.

© Nihon Kanji Noryoku Kentei Kyokai



Learning to write characters with a brush and *sumi* ink is popular with many people in Japan from children to adults, and many take private lessons. The most common reason people attend shodo lessons is in order to be able to write with a more skillful hand. Others take up the art as a way of expressing themselves or of enjoying the pleasures of expression through handwriting.

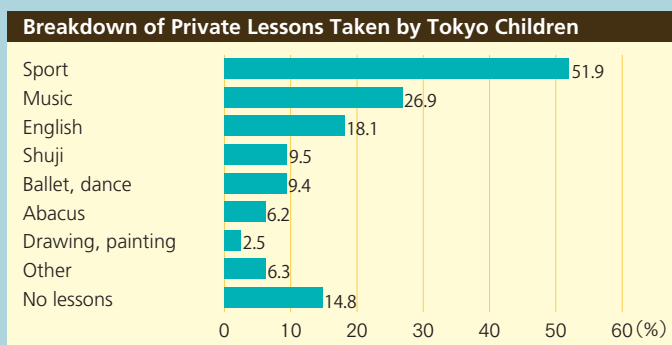
Learning in School

The curriculum in elementary and junior high school includes what is called *shosha* 書写 (usually called *shuji* 習字), that is, “copying characters.” First and second graders practice writing characters correctly and beautifully using a soft pencil, but in third through sixth grade, students have practice writing with brush and *sumi* ink about one hour per week. In junior high school as well, about 1-2 hours per month are set aside for writing practice with brush and *sumi* ink. Learning about the origin of characters and the correct stroke order as well as how to write neatly is aimed at helping children acquire good discipline and cultivate their powers of concentration.

In high school, on the other hand, shodo is in most cases an elective subject in the arts, and students can choose it from among other options like art and music. Shodo is taught in high school as a subject aimed at cultivating student’s artistic sensibilities, powers of self-expression, and appreciation of art.

Private Lessons

Among elementary school students *shuji* is the fourth most popular private lesson (*naraigoto* 習いごと), after music, English, and sports like swimming. The number who continue to take *shuji* or shodo lessons falls off among junior and senior high school students, but many adults either begin or resume their practice of shodo in adult education classes or through correspondence courses. Some 70 percent of the some 3,900,000 people who pursue shodo are reported to be 50 years and over (Leisure White Paper 2008).



Source: “Basic Survey on Learning: Six International Cities,” Benesse Educational Research & Development Center

Notes: Includes multiple choices for some respondents. Figures include clubs attended outside of school.

Kakizome 書き初め (first calligraphy of the year)

The custom of celebrating the first writing of the year using a brush is also a familiar part of Japanese life. In fact, writing assigned characters on specified paper with a brush and *sumi* ink is winter-holiday homework for most elementary and ju-

nior high school students. For example, one elementary school in Tokyo assigned the characters for O-Shogatsu お正月 (New Year’s) for third graders and the characters for *kibo no hikari* 希望の光 (light of hope) to fourth graders. Some schools hold *kakizomekai* 書き初め会 meets at which the students are gathered in the gymnasium or other large hall soon after school starts following New Year’s. Sheets of paper are stretched out on the floor, and everyone does the assigned writing together. In some cases the school assigns the work to be done at home over the holidays and brought to school, after which their work is put on display as a *kakizome* exhibition for all to appreciate. *Kakizome* exhibitions are often mounted in shopping malls, civic centers, or other venues as well.

One of the largest-scale *kakizomekai* in Japan is that held each year at Tokyo’s Nippon Budokan martial arts hall. For the 2010 event, some 2,800 people from age 3 to their eighties who had passed an initial screening did their “first writing” of the year at the Budokan. The Prime Minister’s Prize and other awards for excellence were awarded to 330 works produced at the meet.



National Kakizomekai Meet at the Nippon Budokan. Participants hold up their work to show.

Manga: *Tome Hane! Suzuri Koko Shodobu* (Stop! Flip! The Suzuri High School Shodo Club)

This manga (とめはねっ！ 鈴里高校書道部) portrays how the protagonists, a boy student just back from several years living in Canada, and a powerful girl member of the school’s judo club, become engrossed in shodo. It includes scenes of the club’s participation in performance shodo. A big hit, this manga sold more than 1,500,000 copies of its six volumes published so far. It was made into a television drama broadcast in early 2010. The words in the title, “tome hane” are words from basic stroke endings in shodo: the *tome* とめ, a complete stop, the *hane* はね, the upward flip, and the *harai* はらい, the sweep.



© Kawai Katsutoshi / SHOGAKUKAN

Let's Try Shodo!

書いてみよう



What You Will Need

The equipment needed includes: inkstone, *sumi* ink, brush, paper, writing pad, and paperweight.

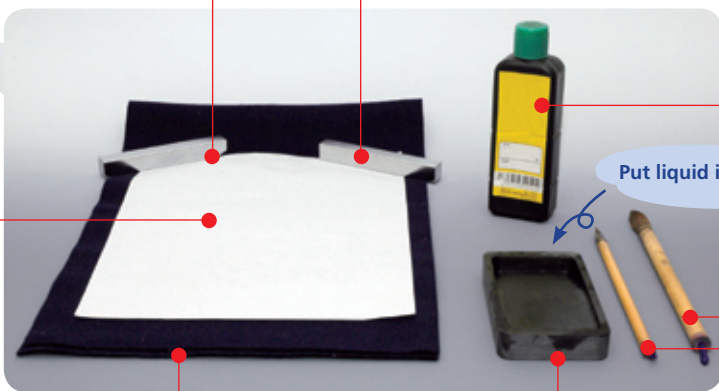
carrying case for shodo equipment



shodo paper (半紙 *hanshi*):
Paper made especially for shodo practice. Standard is 334 x 242 mm.

paperweight (文鎮 *bunchin*):
Weight to hold the paper in place.

liquid *sumi* ink (墨汁 *bokuju*):
Bottles of pre-prepared *sumi* ink are also available.



Put liquid ink here.



ink stick (墨 *sumi*):
Made from soot of burned oil or pine wood mixed with glue and dried into a stick. Pour a little water into the inkstone and rub with the ink stick.

You can write thick strokes by pressing down on the brush and thin lines by using just the slender tip.



writing pad (下敷き *shitajiki*):
Pad to lay out under the paper.

inkstone (硯 *suzuri*): Used to make ink by rubbing an ink stick into a small amount of water and pool the ink at one end. Most are made of stone.

brush (筆 *fude*): Most shodo brushes are made with horse, sheep, weasel, or raccoon-dog hair set into a wooden or bamboo handle.

See movie showing how to hold a brush and make ink at "Shodo chotto mi koza" (A Glimpse of Shodo).
<http://www.nyumon.net/ultimate/119/index.html>

Styles of Shodo

The five classic styles of shodo are *tensho*, *reisho*, *kaisho*, *gyosho*, and *sosho*. Added to these are the *kana* and *hentaigana* (variant *kana*) characters of the Japanese syllabaries. The *kana* were created in Japan around the ninth century based on ideographs introduced from China.



kaisho 楷書 *gyosho* 行書 *sosho* 草書 *kana* 仮名

© Makino Fumiyouki

kaisho: block-style, with easily readable strokes
gyosho: cursive style in which some strokes are abbreviated; between the *kaisho* and *sosho* styles
sosho: "grass writing" in which characters are further abbreviated
kana: phonetic syllabary developed from *sosho*-style writing.



tensho てん書 *reisho* 隸書 *kaisho* 楷書 *gyosho* 行書 *sosho* 草書

© Matsudaira Saeko

Fude-pen 筆ペン

Even those who are familiar with shodo rarely use a brush for writing in everyday life. There are some situations, however, when it is traditional to write with a brush in the vertical style, such as in the guest books at reception desks for weddings and funerals and for signing the customary envelopes used to present cash gifts on such occasions. The *fude-pen* is a convenient invention that can be manipulated like a pen to write characters that look as if written with a brush.



© TjF

Some people handwrite the addresses on their New Year's cards (年賀状 *nengajo*) using a brush or *fude-pen*, but in recent years there is a trend towards printing the addresses using a brushwork-like font.

More information about *nengajo*:
www.tjf.or.jp/eng/content/japaneseculture/07nenga.htm

Let's Try!

Can you guess what phonetic character (hiragana) was created from the following kanji?

1. 也 (也)
2. 加 (加)
3. 寸 (寸)
4. 仁 (仁)
5. 世 (世)

The answers can be found at
<http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/bi02.htm>