A Law, Principal, and Art of Writing
Integrating Korean Calligraphy into different media

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As I researched Typography in my some classes, I was attracted to a particular aspect of typography: 'Calligraphy'. Today, email has taken the place of traditional letter writing. The new generation have grown with keyboards instead of pens in their everyday life, using computers, cell phones and PDAs, etc. It is not difficult to find people who send electronic Christmas cards or New Year cards through email. In spite of the convenient and useful aspects of using electronic devices to write, the appreciation of beautiful, artistic handwriting still remains. The development of computers has raised the level of typography to a significantly advanced stage. Typography is used in a variety of media especially in the advertising industry. Since calligraphy is a part of typography, there is also a trend integrating calligraphy, the old fashioned handwriting, with many different media, especially in Far Eastern Asia. Korea is one of the countries that take the traditional calligraphy very seriously. Because the popularity of using calligraphy in many industries is growing quickly, I have decided to integrate Korean calligraphy in different media for my graduate thesis.

Calligraphy has a long history. In western culture, it is more likely known as beautiful handwriting with a pen. Calligraphy in the East, on the other hand, is quite different, especially in China, Japan and Korea. Among the 3 countries that use Chinese characters, Korean calligraphy has pursued a more artistic aspect, while the quality of writing itself was extremely important in other countries. The Chinese character that Koreans use for Calligraphy is called Seoye(書藝) which means the art of writing, while the Chinese use the word, Shiufa(書法), which means the law of writing, and the Japanese use Shiudo(書道), which means the principle of writing.
[Calligraphy in Korean. Youngwoo Nam. 2008]

However, integrating calligraphy into different media does not have a long history in Korea. It has only been integrated for about 10 years, while the Japanese have used calligraphy in so many ways for much longer. Due to my personal situation, I have had the chance to visit Japan quite often. It is truly remarkable how effectively the Japanese make use of calligraphy in advertising. Calligraphy is used in many ways, from the huge signs advertising stores, to small drink bottles. This experience in Japan has given me an opportunity to look at the calligraphy in Korea from a different perspective. Even though the history of the use of calligraphy in different media is not as long as the one in Japan, Korea has shown significant development in a short period of time, especially in the movie industry. Before I go any further, it would be a good idea if I introduce a brief history of the Korean language, which is called ‘Hangul’.

Before the invention of ‘Hangul’, Chinese characters and Chinese writing were imported from China and were used as the written language in Korea. Since Chinese and Korean were different languages, there were some difficulties in using Chinese as Korea’s written language. King Sejong, the fourth monarch of the Choson Dynasty, invented the true Korean (Hangul) in 1443. Originally 28 letters were used, but now only fourteen consonants and ten vowels are used. Sixteen additional symbols (five consonants and eleven vowels) are made by combining these basic
letters. According to Lee, "Hangul is different from all other language because of its unique and logical structure. The consonants were made from our mouth shapes and the vowels were made from the foundation of the earth, sky, land, and human'. One of the things that make Hangul great is its simplicity. It is easy to learn to write Hangul, it takes as little as 2 weeks to learn how to write it. Another thing that makes Hagul great is that most of the sounds can be written in Korean. Hangul consists of a series of lines, circles and squares that make it a simple and unique design.

Practicing calligraphy has been more than just drawing pretty words on paper. Korean ancestors gained knowledge and cleared their minds by practicing calligraphy. Before the practical and beautiful Hangul was born, they used Chinese characters to practice calligraphy. However, some scholars invented unique brush stroke styles, escaping from the Chinese style. Chusa, Kim Jung Hui established his own calligraphy style which contains the beauty of pleasantry and humor and also the beauty of line and white space. It was a time in which a lot of Chinese culture influenced Korea, so developing the new style was a great challenge but he was successful.

Korean modern calligraphy not only expresses the beauty of the text itself but can also represent a company or product image in a direct or indirect way. The sentimental part of calligraphy is getting attention in many design fields. Today, calligraphy is found in a variety of ways in the general visuals that we see, as movie posters, TV advertisements, newspapers, magazines, package design etc. It is not easy to define what exactly calligraphy is. The dictionary defines calligraphy as "the art of producing beautiful handwriting using a brush or a special pen". Thus, a calligrapher is a person who produces beautiful handwriting. The traditional calligrapher is closer to the meaning in the dictionary. Even though calligraphy can be art itself, if it is applied to different media, and becomes a part of the design of a product or an object.

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which it is a little different from the original definition. People who integrate calligraphy into different media are called calligraphists. Also, Sa Sek Gyul Pip said in his blog that it is interesting that people have started using a new word ‘Calli-illustration’ which means an illustration with a calligraphic effect. We tend to think that calligraphy is hand written text, but designers are combining illustrated figures with the calligraphy image, so sometimes the writing becomes the figure.

The reason calligraphy attracts attention in illustrations is that the rhythm and simple figure of a stroke catches the viewer’s eye more than a detailed and descriptive figure. Also, it is effective to relieve the rigidity of geometric expression and respond to natural human emotion. There is difference in the tools and the methods used, but calligraphy is used as an instant and experimental means of expression. Besides its text function, calligraphy has a formative role. Even though there is no picture, calligraphy itself can play both roles for the meaning and the picture.

We are surrounded by geometric forms in our visual environment, such as signs for stores and buildings, printed documents and fonts used in computer programs. The appropriate use of the natural and emotional expression of calligraphy may alter this environment, making it softer and more unique. Calligraphy allows the artist or designer to express with the grain of the brush, the texture of the paper, or the contrast, which is difficult to show in traditional computer fonts. The goal of calligraphy is to maximize a word’s meaning, and in addition, to find the exact style that matches the purpose of the product or object. It is an operation putting human emotion into text that regulated fonts cannot express.

One of the communication design areas that often uses calligraphy is the design of movie posters. The Korean movie industry is rapidly growing and as a result, the use of calligraphy to deliver the characteristic of the movie is increasing and people’s interest in calligraphy is also growing. Calligraphy in commercial art has developed in the last 10 years, although, hand lettered signs were used for most signage until the early 1960’s. It almost disappeared after Western culture arrived in Korea and with the development of computers.
However, the recent design trend has brought the revival of the classic and natural style of calligraphy. Most of calligraphy used in movie posters has unique characteristics that only can be seen in the poster. If the movie is a horror movie, the style of text is designed to suggest bleeding or capturing the feeling of the movie. In order to express the variety of movies, new experiments in calligraphic design often are used. For example, for a movie called ‘To Die or To Be Bad’, the designer broke a pair of wooden chopsticks diagonally and used them as a brush to get the feeling of the actor bleeding from his mouth. In an action movie, ‘Revenge Is Mine’, the upper part of the calligraphy is bleeding because the background is water and the lower part is sharp and dry in order to relate it to the sword the actor carries in the movie.

Calligraphy in movie titles began in the early 1990’s. At that time, it was not so different from a regular font, but the ones in recent movie titles actively show the particular characteristics such as the massiveness of ink and the texture of the brush. Making the movie title using a unique style of calligraphy is not as easy as it seems. It is essential for the designer to watch the movie hundreds of times to get the feeling and to analyze the scenario, pictures, backgrounds, etc. In the office of the calligraphy design company ‘Pilnuk’, which designed the title for the movie ‘Champion’, many different design drafts are on the wall. Those experiments that are different from the final piece speak for the complicated nature of the process.

An important aspect of making a movie title is that it has to harmonize with the other visuals in the poster. The calligraphy has to look good itself, but also it has to relate to the background movie image. This is where the difference between traditional and new calligraphy is evident. A designer has to re-design the calligraphy many times until the calligraphy matches well with the movie image. It is obvious that calligraphy is one of the major trends for the movie industry but excessive use without proper knowledge is ineffective. Thus, appropriate calligraphy design that is compatible with the movie is necessary.

One of things that make people choose a book in a book store is the cover. Sometimes I go to a bookstore without any particular book in mind and just pick a book that has an
interesting cover design. That is one of the reasons that I became interested in Japanese novels. These days, calligraphy is a big part of book cover design. ‘Myogio’ and ‘Dotum’ were the major fonts used in most book titles in Korea, but now one out of 10 book titles is in calligraphy, so some people misunderstand that calligraphers are people who design book titles. Kang Byung In, a professional calligrapher, has designed the beautiful book cover for ‘Happy Egoist’, ‘Freely’, ‘Forest in Dessert’. He majored in industrial design in college and worked in an advertising company before he became a professional calligrapher. He is the artist who designed the labels for ‘Sansachun’ and ‘Chamisul’ which are the most popular drinks in Korea. In 2003, he was noticed by the book cover design industry. He caught the readers’ eyes with brisk strokes on the light red background in the novel ‘Happy Egoist’ which is probably his most famous book cover design. He used a smooth and sensitive style, having female readers in mind. Alternatively, he used a strong and aggressive style in ‘Freely’, targeting male readers. According to Kang Byung In, it is not just necessarily to convey the meaning of words but also to visualize the story of the book by maximizing the formative aspect of calligraphy. 2 Ideal calligraphy design for book titles is matching the style with the story of the book as much as possible.

It has been just 2 ~ 3 years since calligraphy became popular in the book title business but there had been some previous attempts. Some book cover designers used their own handwriting to design the book title. The title writing of Shin Young Bok, a professor at Sunggonghwe University, inspired many calligraphers. He used his own traditional calligraphy writing for his book titles in ‘Speculation in Prison’, ‘Together with Forest’, ‘Tree Tree’, and ‘Lecture’. Kang Byung In also was influenced by his traditional writing style. The recently released book ‘Anxiety of Psychology’ shows a new aspect of calligraphy. The giddy and wide writing style implies the anxiety, just like the title. It defies the meaning of calligraphy, beauty of writing, and expresses the content of the book directly with an ugly handwriting style. In this case, calligraphy for the book title does not have to be beautiful writing. Most importantly, it should

be able to represent the contents of the book.

Calligraphy is now used not only in the movie and book industries but also in a variety of advertising businesses such as package design, store signs, company logos and especially in the restaurant business. Kim Yoon Jeong, a director of the design team in a restaurant consulting company (OGM Korea), says that they had a design team in Japan so they had knowledge about the use of calligraphy in commercial design. It was a special and unique method of design about 3～4 years ago, but today using calligraphy in the restaurant business is very popular. It is interesting that restaurants of East Asian ideographic countries like China, Japan, and Korea prefer to have a calligraphic style in their logo or brand identity. However, it does not have to be limited to only those Asian countries. It is possible to apply calligraphy to western style restaurants too, if the tools and presentation matches with the restaurant’s concept. Using other elements like combining illustration with calligraphy helps to improve the design as well. Calligraphy does not have to be created by brush. It can be created with many different tools. For a wine specialty store (Swine), a designer created a unique dark pink colored font, which recalls wine and is recognized even if it is located in a crowded environment.

Recently, calligraphy is being used in brand identities for franchise restaurants. The wooden sign of ‘Shin Si Hwaro’ uses brush style calligraphy in order to represent a Korean family restaurant. The words are not arranged horizontally, but placed irregularly. A similar type of barbeque restaurant ‘Hwaro Sarang’ also uses brush stroke calligraphy in their sign, so it makes customers feel like they are in traditional Korean house. The font that is used in the brand identity must express restaurant image to customers.

I have experimented and integrated calligraphy into three different media. One is creating an informative website about Korean calligraphy. The flash animation intro of the website has an Asian brushstroke and background that give the users the feel of the Asian calligraphy.
[Korean Calligraphy Website. Youngwoo Nam. 2008]

A brief history of western, Asian and Korean calligraphy provides the general idea of calligraphy in different regions. I have tried to collect as many samples as possible calligraphy used in different media to show how calligraphy is used in many products that are hard to find in western countries. Although the web is not officially publicized yet, I would like to develop it more and put it on the web. I hope this website helps people learn about Korean calligraphy as well as the culture.

For my second example, I created posters using Korean calligraphy. The three black and white posters represent the word ‘calligraphy’ in Korean. I first used the Korean thick brush to write it on a special paper called ‘Hanji’ made for the brush strokes. Once I produced the image I wanted, I scanned the image and digitized it so I could open it in Photoshop and refine it to make it ready for printing. I had to use many sheets of papers and much ink until I could get the image I wanted. Using a similar procedure, I produced 2 movie poster titles of western movies. I had watched the movie ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ before but I had to watch the movie again to get the feeling of it, rather than the story. The dripping ink effect for the title of this movie worked quite well. The texture of Hanji helped to get the effect that I wanted. I like the
I created most of the design figures by using brushstrokes including the leaves in the background. Even though I used graphic programs to retouch the image, the poster, which uses the calligraphy, expresses the characteristics of the restaurant very well. I wanted to show the commercial use of calligraphy by creating the calligraphy movie title posters and Tokyo Japanese restaurant poster. One difference between traditional calligraphy and the ones I made is that mine can be produced in large quantities, since the images are digitized, while traditional calligraphic writing or can be only one on paper.

In 2006, I was watching TV and a program caught my attention because I saw very familiar characters in a fashion show in Paris. It was Hangul design fashion that Korean designer Lee Sang Bong used in the Paris Pret a Porter Collection. The theme of the show was ‘Moonlight Shadow’ (L’ ombre Lunaire) and all 51 pieces of cloth had Korean calligraphy on them. Lee
Sang Bong runs his own brand (Liesangbong Paris). He says “Foreigners do not even know we have our own language (Hangul). They think we only use spoken Korean and just use Chinese characters for writing. However, Hangul is our own proud culture and has marketable potential too.” For fashion designers and models, Pret a porter collection is a dream stage since world famous brands such as Louis Vuitton and Chanel release their new designs, and directors of films, advertisements, and IT companies come to see the show from all over the world. Lee Sang Bong’s design integrating calligraphy with fashion were a great success because they not only drew the media’s attention but also buyers showed interest and actually purchased his designs in large quantities. Lee Sang Bong decided to use Hangul in his fashion design not simply because he wanted to get people’s attention or because he was a patriot. He knew that fashion is a business and he was confident in making a successful product. He knew Hangul had great market potential. The first decision he had to make was what kind of writing style he would use. He decided to use a handwritten style instead of standardized computer fonts. He said, “If it is not wearable then the fashion cannot be globalized. Traditional culture has to go on as it is, but tradition and industry are different. In order to make foreigners wear our culture, we need to modify it for them.” Integrating calligraphy in different media needs to keep the tradition but harmonize it with the medium at the same time.

As I have mentioned above, the Korean fashion designer, ‘Lee Sang Bong’, inspired me to take Korean calligraphy as my graduate thesis and produce my third thesis project which is a t-shirt design. Even though my Korean calligraphy T-shirt designs are far simpler that any of his fashion designs, I have tried to create my own integration of calligraphy and different media. The thick circle shape brushstroke means “universe” and unifies each individual t-shirt design.
[Overview of entire t-shirts. Youngwoo Nam. 2008]

The design series starts from the second in the bottom row and goes clockwise. Each design indicates or stands for a specific meaning and it would be interesting after you to make own story as you go around the circle. I used the screen-printing to add the images to blank T-shirts. My images are all black and white, except for the personal stamp on the bottom right.

Before I started the calligraphy design for my projects, I thought it would be a simple and easy procedure. However, as I developed the design, it was difficult to express the feeling of products through my strokes. Since the ink brush stroke cannot be erased, if the stroke does not produce the result I intended, then I have to start over on a new sheet of paper again. One of the interesting aspects of calligraphy is that you may have the chance to generate accidental
design. Sometimes I got a better result than I had intended due to the characteristics of the brush. This is one of the reasons that Korean calligraphy is becoming more popular in the advertising industry. Traditional calligraphy has so many rules to follow, such as making the ink, the placement of the paper, the use of the brush, etc. Yet, you are free to develop any kind of style when you draw lines or shapes.

Calligraphy has grown so much in the advertising industry in Korea, so it is difficult to discuss design without it. It definitely will grow more in this digital world to relived people from the rigid and dry design industry. It is important to look at the calligraphy works with the background and how it is made. I learned a lot about calligraphy and how to integrate it in to different media through this project.
References


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