IMPRESSIONS AND EXPRESSIONS:

THE ENTHRALING ART OF CHINESE SEALS

by Mike Harty,

Although the seal is small, no longer than your finger and no larger that two square inches, it contains development and structure and, in its sweep and profundity, can be as satisfying as a fine work of literary art.

‘Lidai yinxue lunwenxuan’
A Treatise on the Study of Seals from Past Dynasties
Han Tianheng born 1940

Seals exist in almost every civilisation. They have been used principally as a mark of power, to give authority to orders or directions from kings and emperors, governors and generals. They are often things of great beauty. The royal seals of Egypt and of Mesopotamia, for example, are featured in major museums and private collections, not only for their historical significance, but also for their intrinsic artistic value.

In China, while it is suggested in various texts that seals have been used by people of power since very early times, the oldest authenticated seals date only from the Warring States period (480 — 221 BC); although references to seal impressions can be found in literature dating back to the Spring and Autumn period (722 — 481 BC).

THE BAGUA

The vast majority of seals, because they relate to names, involve writing; which means the development of seals is intimately aligned with the development of writing. The earliest Chinese writing dates back to the origins of Chinese culture. The Chinese believe that their writing began with the development in the third millennium BC, of the Bagua, the eight trigrams of the Yijing or Book of Changes.

JIAGUWEN

The oldest systematised script is called Jiaguwen 甲骨文 or oracle bone writing because it was used on bones and tortoise shells used in divination during the Shang dynasty, which
thrived through the middle of the second millennium BC, near Anyang in Henan province.

**EXAMPLE 2: JIAGUWEN**

**JINWEN**

This script developed and changed to suit the medium of bronze casting, and we have examples of writings in intaglio or raised writing on the inside surfaces of ritual bronze vessels used during the Shang and the later Zhou dynasties. This is the script known as Jinwen 金文.

One could say that this was the origin of seal carving; these characters were inscribed into the soft clay moulds from which the vessels were cast, and because the message had to be right-reading in the finished cast version, the inscription had to be mirror-reversed, which is exactly the same way that the sealist has to carve.

**EXAMPLE 3: JINWEN**

Most of the characters in the Jinwen form have softer, rounder corners than the sharper, harder forms of the oracle bone writing. However, rather like the spelling conventions of early English, when the same word could be spelt two or three different ways by the same writer in the same work, the Chinese of that period had not standardised either the size or form of their writing.

**THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA**

This was to be a development of that extraordinary historical period which lasted from 221 to 206 BC. This was dominated by one of the most fascinating men in human history: Qin Shihuangdi, who unified a number of warring kingdoms and made himself the first emperor of China.

Qin Shihuangdi not only created the first unified government systems in the country; he also standardised weights and measures, encouraged the establishment of a system of
roads and bridges by standardising axle lengths in vehicles, and continued the development of the nearly 2000 kilometres long canal which still links the city of Hangzhou in Zhejiang province with Tongxian, near Beijing.

EXAMPLE 4: SHOU MING YU JI SHOU YONG CHANG
THE EMPEROR RULES BY HEAVEN'S MANDATE,
LONG MAY HE LIVE AND THRIVE

But for those interested in Chinese culture, by far the most important and significant task he set in motion was the standardisation of a single written form for the many languages used in his empire.

Some people do not realise that the Chinese do not write in dialect, for example in Cantonese or in Mandarin. There is only one written form throughout China, and people can communicate in writing even when they cannot understand a single word of each other’s speech.

Qin Shihuangdi’s prime minister, Li Su, created the first Chinese dictionary, a collection of some 3300 characters which became the basis of a standardised form.

The forms prior to this codification are known as Dazhuan or great seal script, while the style that followed is called Xiaozhuan or small seal script.

The new forms were promulgated in seven imperial edicts praising Qin Shihuangdi’s regime and its achievements, which were inscribed on huge stone monuments and on mountainsides in the years between 219 and 211 BC.

Today, the term ‘seal script’ is applied to all the inscriptions - from the early oracle bone writings, the bronze intaglios, the stele and mountainside edicts, as well as those written forms found on tile ends, bricks, coins, measures, pottery - and of course — seals.

Concurrent with the latter stages of the Zhuanshu or seal script was the development of the brush, and with that a new style of writing to suit the new writing instrument.

This writing is called Lishu or clerical script. The earliest examples date from the beginnings of (or perhaps even just before) the Qin empire. However this style did not come into wide usage until the Han dynasty (206 BC— 232 AD). The development of this writing style, and the styles that followed, including the important stylistic developments of the Wei and Song dynasties, are not particularly relevant to a discussion of seal engraving and should be the subject of a separate discussion.
Nevertheless, the serious student of seal carving can look back at more than two thousand years of seal use in China, and can classify the seal impressions available into at least six broad categories:

1. Seals of Authority
2. Name Seals
3. Pen-name Seals
4. Collection Seals
5. Picture Seals
6. Leisure Seals

Seals of Authority were used by kings and generals and high officials to give power to their edicts and directions. The seal illustrated is considered to be a copy of the famous Succession Seal, reputed to have been originally carved for the first emperor of China — Qin Shihuangdi.

**SEAL IMPRESSIONS**

Name seals are used as a kind of alternative signature, or personal mark. They are probably the most common type of seals in use today. In Hong Kong, Japan, China and Korea, they are still often demanded for such legal instruments as bank documents, wedding and divorce papers, and in the purchase and sale of property.

Pen-name seals are another class of seals, used by the literati - writers, artists, poets and calligraphers — who often adopted a soubriquet or ‘style’ that they felt better expressed their attitude to their state of development, or feelings, or even, just how they saw themselves.

The Chinese artist often has a number of pen names, changing them from time to time to suit his mood or feeling of development. One biographer of the late Qing dynasty artist, scholar, calligrapher and sealist, Wu Changshuo (1844-1927), listed twelve different pen names used by the artist at various times. As you can imagine, this sometimes makes the verification of work by a particular artist very complicated.

This category of pen-name seals also includes ‘studio name’ seals, which refers to the name given to the artist's studio and is sometimes used as another way to sign and give personal approval to their work.

Collection seals are used by collectors to indicate that they own or have owned a particular book, or a piece of work. Collection seals can be useful in authenticating Chinese art. Particularly if the seals are from collections with good documentation. The Qing emperor Qianlong (1736-1796) had a very large collection seal, which unfortunately he often chose to place in the optical centre of paintings and calligraphies that he owned.
Pictorial seals were used from as early as the Zhou dynasty (1122-256 BC). One of the more common uses for these seals was in securing the information (tallies and other important records) which were written on strips of bamboo, often woven with line cords to make a flat ‘page’ not unlike a table mat. This was rolled up, tied with a cord, and the knot secured with a blob of clay, which was then impressed with one of these seals.

Many modern sealists enjoy copying these ancient seals, and they make a beautiful and archaic addition to a piece of modern calligraphy. The fish was carved by a contemporary Chinese sealist. (Example 6)

The final category is leisure seals. Leisure seals are a wonderful indulgence by the seal carver. They are really ‘show—off’ seals. Their primary purpose is to display skill and erudition, but they can also be used to decorate a painting or calligraphy with another idea related to the work itself, or to the attitude of the artist at the time that the work was done. They may contain a proverb, an aphorism, a line from a poem, or the whole poem itself. They sometimes pose a puzzle — a rebus in which the seal artist plays mind games with his audience.

But whatever kind of seal he is carving, the seal carver must create an entire and complete composition, with all its design and communicative goals, on a very small surface — sometimes as small as one square centimetre, seldom larger than nine square centimetres.
But, he must also maintain the readability of the characters involved. Here the wonderful richness of the Chinese written language becomes an ally rather than an enemy.

In the Roman alphabet that we use every day, there are only 26 characters and 10 numbers. The variety of styles of writing are limited to capital letters (called upper case) and the small letters (called lower case). Despite the fact that there are thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of typefaces or individual alphabet designs, these almost always adhere to a very strict and established set of conventions for each individual letter.

And despite the relatively recent development of Western calligraphy into an art form, and the new approaches to the design of letter forms that are emerging, we still do not begin to come close to the range of character design variations available to the Chinese calligrapher.

This means that a seal carver must be, first and foremost, an experienced calligrapher. He must have a detailed knowledge of Chinese epigraphy, and have spent years practising writing with a brush, because the strokes depicted on a seal should have the same strength, the same dynamism, the same qi as the strokes you see in good calligraphy and in Chinese painting.

Here are some guidelines to help you make your own assessments — not only of the seals illustrated with this article, but also of the seals you will come across in the future.

A seal should have a feeling of elegance and a strong sense of design. It should have a feeling of power, not just in the totality of its appearance, but in the character of the calligraphic lines used in the seal.

You should be able to see a balance of strength and delicacy, and a balance of red and white. The seal should also have a sense of antiquity — a feeling that perhaps the seal is older than you know it really is. This is not just in the manner in which the sealist has distressed the edges or surface of the stone; it must be inherent in the design of the seal. Above all the artistry of the carving should dominate the craftsmanship of the carver — and not vice versa.

Furthermore, you should carefully examine the calligraphy in the seal. Each character should be beautiful in itself — and each character should be both in sympathy and in harmony with its neighbours.

In these examples of seals, I will try to point out some of the aspects that have attracted me.
EXAMPLE 7: NAN ER SHANG BU CHENG MING SHEN YI LAO
ALREADY OLD, BUT NOT YET FAMOUS
男兒生不成名身—老

Comment: I particularly like the solid style of the calligraphy, and the clever use of the individual spaces. The lines of the individual characters merge into the lines that define the character spaces, creating very powerful rhythms and strength in the ‘negative space’ — the solid parts of the design.

EXAMPLE 8: SHAN SI YOU WU ZHONG
THE ETHEREAL COLOUR OF THE MOUNTAIN
山色有無中

Comment: A delightful use of space and line. The solid mountain shape balances the open space surrounding the central descending line of zhong. The conflict between the angular lines in se and you create an interesting feeling of movement.

EXAMPLE 9: KONG SHAN SHIN YU HOU
THE MOUNTAINS ARE EMPTY AFTER THE NEW RAINS
空山新雨後

Comment: Compare the word ‘mountain’ in this seal with the previous one. Also notice the strong vertical treatment on the right hand side of the seal, against the large empty space and slanting line of the left hand side.

EXAMPLE 10: JIN SHI YAN NIAN
EPIGRAPHY EXTENDS THE YEARS
金石延年
**Comment:** This seal has a wonderful artlessness, a child-like simplicity that hides a very sophisticated and complex design. Particularly look at the clever balance on both diagonals; the negative space on the left hand side of *jin* being responded to by the equivalent space of the right hand side of *nian*, while the more compact and horizontal shapes of *shi* and *yan* provide an interesting counterpoint.

![Seal Image]

**EXAMPLE II: BAI NIAO ZAI LIN BU RU YI NIAO ZAI SHOU**
A BIRD IN THE HAND IS WORTH TWO IN THE BUSH
百鳥在林不如一鳥在手

Comment: The literal translation is actually more like ‘a hundred birds in the forest is not like one bird in the hand’. In the design, you should pay attention to the ingenious compacting of two characters into one space. The third character of the right hand side (*zui*) has a long horizontal at the top; the top space on the left hand side actually contains two characters (*yi* and *niao*), creating a harmonious echo of *zai*. The generally distressed face of the stone gives this seal an attractive feeling of age.

![Seal Images]

**EXAMPLE 12: A 20-CHARACTER TANG DYNASTY POEM ON FOUR SEALS**
嶺外音書絕，Away from home, I was longing for news
經冬復立春。Winter after winter, spring after spring.
近鄉情更怯，Now, nearing my village, meeting people,
不敢問來人。I dare not ask a single question.

Comment: These four seals have been designed to both echo the meaning of the lines of the poem and to maintain a feeling of poetic form through the design. The distribution of characters on the four seals have a rhythm of 2-1-2, 2-2-1, 2-1-2, 2-2-1.

EXAMPLE I3: LI CHANG BU BIAN
A PERSON OF STRONGLY HELD PRINCIPLES
立場不辯

Comment: This is a good example of a seal design demonstrating the meaning of the words. This seal has a great deal of strength. The lines are definite and bold. the four characters sit comfortably together, with a feeling of stability and confidence. The seal of ‘a person with strongly held principles’!

EXAMPLE I4: RI JIU JIAN REN XIN
WITH THE PASSING OF TIME ONE SEES MEN’S TRUE HEART
日久見人心

Comment: This seal has been designed to be difficult to read - a rebus, a puzzle. The irregular shape of the stone and the use of particular archaic forms assist in hiding the message. Once the message and intent have been explained, the characters become clear to people with some familiarity to seal script.

EXAMPLE I5: BI PI
BRUSH ADDICT
箪癖

Comment: This seal combines the concept of a picture seal with a typical ‘leisure seal’ expression. The idea of someone being addicted to brushes would also mean that same person would also have at least one water bottle — which is the shape of the seal.
Finally, I would like to share with you a seal with a message that means a lot to me. From the moment I first saw it, and read its simple but telling message. I realised its truth, and understood how it related to me and my life.

EXAMPLE 16; REN BU KE YI WU PI
MAN ACHIEVES NOTHING WITHOUT HIS OBSESSIONS!

Comment: These two seals show how two sealists with the same intent can develop designs which are quite independent of each other. The seal at the top was carved by Ou Da Wei, a contemporary sealist from Guandong province in China, the seal below it was carved by the author. In both cases, the characters are the same, but the style and expression are quite different.

This article is based on a talk Mike Harty gave to members of The Asian Arts Society of Australia.