

**WORDS**  
as **ART**  
with **WORDS**

**An Introduction to Chinese Calligraphy**

**Asian** | Education

Lead funding for the Asian Art Museum's Education and Public Programs is provided by Bank of America Foundation.

Major support provided by Douglas A. Tilden, The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, The Henri & Tomoye Takahashi Charitable Foundation, Koret Foundation, Freeman Foundation, Atsuhiko and Ina Goodwin Tateuchi Foundation, PARSA Community Foundation, Sugiyama Family Trust, Konigsberg Family Trust, Walter and Elise Haas Fund, and AT&T.

Additional support provided by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, Mary M. Tanenbaum Fund of The San Francisco Foundation, The San Francisco Foundation--Shenson Foundation, the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, and Joseph R. McMicking Foundation.



WALTER & ELISE HAAS FUND



**Asian** | Education

Asian Art Museum  
Chong-Moon Lee Center  
for Asian Art & Culture  
[www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org)

200 Larkin Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
T 415.581.3500  
F 415.581.4700

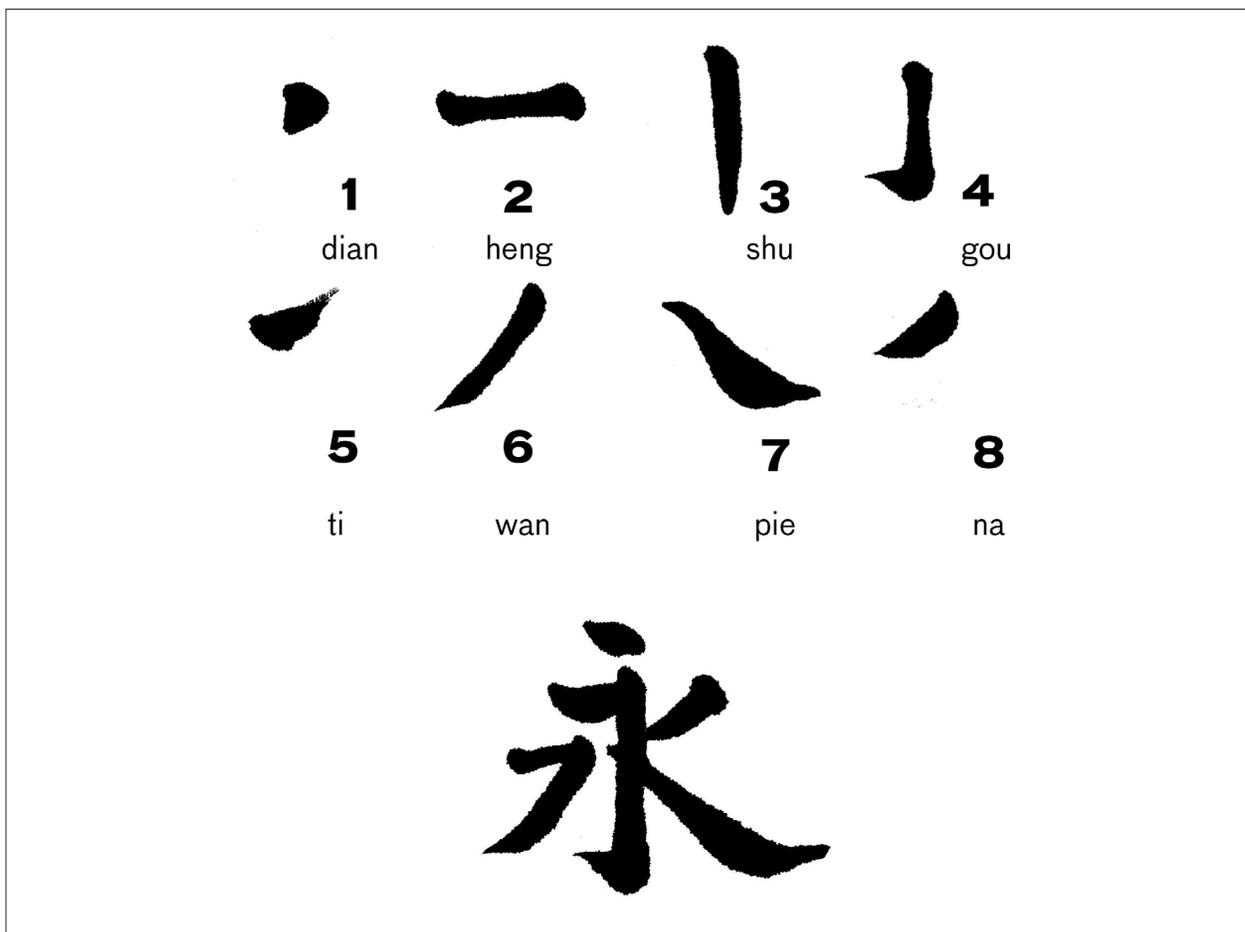
## Words as Art: An Introduction to Chinese Calligraphy

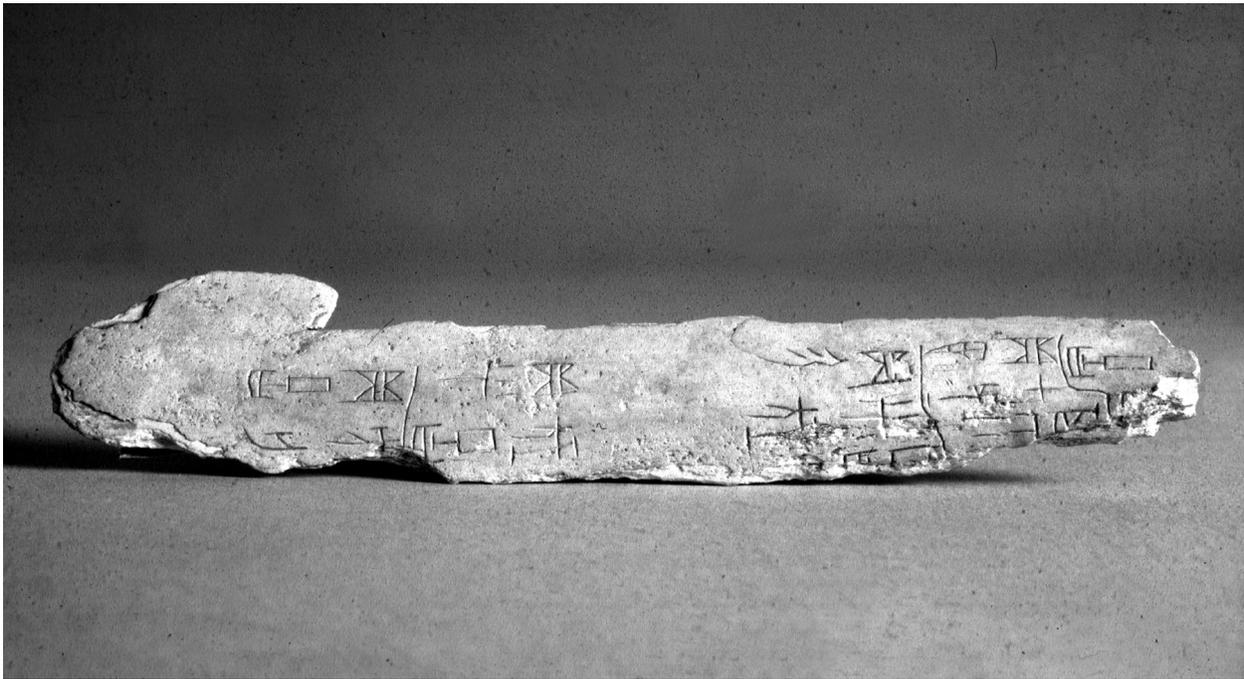
How do you integrate words and art to express an idea? China's educated elite painted artful writing, more commonly known as calligraphy, since at least the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Chinese calligraphy is a visual art. The fluid strokes, dots and lines that form each character are its focus. The content of a calligraphic work, while sometimes inspiring or moving, is usually nothing new. What is fresh, exciting, and creative is the way it is visually expressed.

In China, painting and writing developed hand in hand, sharing the same tools and techniques. Chinese writing is composed of block-like symbols which stand for ideas. Sometimes called ideograms, the symbols more often are referred to as *characters*. These characters, which evolved from pictograms (simplified images of the objects they represent), were modified over time to represent more abstract concepts.

### Basic Strokes

The character *yong* (which means eternity) contains eight strokes and dots that beginning calligraphy students learn as the basis for many other strokes.





Fragment of oracle bone, approx. 1300-1050. China; Henan province. Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE). Probably cattle bone. *The Avery Brundage Collection, B60M502.*

## Early Writing in Ancient China: Oracle Bones

The earliest Chinese writing that historians have found is on Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCD) oracle bones. Oracle bones were used to divine answers to various questions such as the success of a particular harvest, the fate of future military expeditions, and very personal matters such as what to do about a toothache. The questions, answers and outcomes were all recorded on cattle bones and tortoise shells. A metal rod, or perhaps a burning ember was heated and placed on the bone near where the question had been written. The shape of the crack determined the answer, and the outcome (what followed) was sometimes written on the bone.

This oracle bone says: “The Gongfang will not go on a great campaign [against us]. We should order “Attack the Gong[fang].” We should not order “Attack the Gongfang.” On the next jiaxu [day] it will perhaps rain.

What questions or outcomes would you write on an oracle bone today?

## Scripts

Five basic scripts have emerged over 2000 years: Calligraphers design each character to fit into an imaginary square—whether it is composed of one or sixty-four strokes. Writers must create each stroke of a character in a particular order, essentially from left to right and from top to bottom.

The evolution of the Chinese character dragon ( <i>long</i> ) in various script types:		
 Oracle-bone	 Seal	 Clerical
 Cursive	 Semi-cursive	 Standard

There are five basic scripts regularly used in Chinese calligraphy:

### Seal script (Chinese: *zhuanshu*)

These careful, straight lines are related to the earliest forms of Chinese writing.

### Clerical script (*lishu*)

More angled strokes allowed clerks to write official documents more easily and quickly.

### Standard or regular script (*kaishu*)

This clear and easy to read script is commonly used in printed books and signs today.

### Semi-cursive script (*xingshu*; “running script”)

Strokes tend to run together within each character, but the artist usually lifts the brush between each character.

### Cursive script (*caoshu*; “grass script”)

In this free and spontaneous script, artists may get away with abbreviating and abstracting the characters. Characters may run together.

## Tools and Materials: The Four Treasures

*The Four Treasures* are the most essential implements for any painter or calligrapher. They are the brush, paper, the ink stick, and the ink stone,

### The Brush

The brush is very flexible and versatile. It comes to a fine point so that it can produce very thin lines, but it is also fat enough to make wider lines and dots. To make a brush tip, one or several kinds of animal hair may be used including rabbit, wolf, goat, badger, and even the whiskers of mice. Brushes vary in size from tiny, fairly stiff wolf hair brushes for outlining to immense resilient brushes for large calligraphic scrolls. Long tapering brushes are good for swirling movements; short stumpy ones produce a blunt line with the understated impression favored by some of the scholar painters.

### The Paper (or silk)

The next important material, paper, was invented in China during the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 9). Early calligraphers carved records in stone, cast them in bronze, or wrote them on bamboo strips or silk, but all of these materials were too expensive or too big and bulky. It was not until the Tang dynasty (618–906) that painters began to use paper on occasion, and it was not used extensively for pictures until the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). (In fact, most early painting had been done on silk.) At first, calligraphers and painters made paper from rags. Eventually they used various kinds of vegetable fiber, including tree bark, grass, hemp, and grain husk.

### The Ink Stick

Black ink was made from soot mixed with glue and formed into hard sticks. The finely ground soot produces the color while the glue both holds the stick together and acts as an adhesive to bind the ink to the paper or silk. Pine soot, from the inner wood of the tree, produced the best all-around ink, but other kinds of soot and various animal glues have been used. Ink compounders have experimented over the ages with different materials, sometimes adding such unlikely ingredients as powdered pearls and jade dust. Most ink makers guarded their recipes carefully, never writing them down and passing them on only to their apprentices. Therefore, the recipes for making some special ink have been lost such as that for a once-popular bluish ink.

### The Ink Stone

To use the ink stick, painters must grind it with water on a fine-grained stone. The ink stone became one of the *Four Treasures* of the scholar. The quality of the stone's grain was of the greatest importance, but stones were treasured also for their color and beauty. They were cut and carved so that they had a flat surface for grinding.



### Formats

Calligraphy is often painted either on paper or silk; each respond to ink and brush differently. The most common formats for calligraphy are: Fans, albums, hanging scrolls, and handscrolls.

Scrolls are sheets of paper that could be rolled, covered in silk, and stored away. Owners added additional sheets of paper over time, so that scrolls could grow to up to 10 meters (about 20 feet) in length. Handscrolls are read and enjoyed section by section, so it was unusual for a handscroll to be unrolled in its entirety.

## Holding the Brush

1. Hold the brush midway up the handle.
2. Grip the brush like a pen, but leave an open space in the palm of your hand,
3. Hold the brush in a gentle and relaxed manner. Imagine holding a tomato without bruising its skin.
4. Hold the brush at a 90-degree angle, perpendicular with your paper.



## Poetry

The most common subject matter in calligraphy is poetry. Artists either recreate classic works or, occasionally, compose their own. A particular poem might reflect political dissent, disappointment in life, or the joys of retirement.

This album of calligraphy attributed to artist Mi Fu, recalls a 300-year old poem about the Duoqing lou, a famous spot in Jiangsu province known for having some of the most beautiful views in the world. Later collectors and viewers added three colophons and 193 seal impressions.



Poem concerning the Pavilion with Various Views (*Duoqing lou*), in semicursive script (*xingshu*), attributed to Mi Fu. Chinese, 1051-1107. Northern Song dynasty, approx. 1071-1107. Album with 11 pages and 3 pages of comments, ink on paper. *Asian Art Museum, The Yeh Family Collection*, 2004.31.

## Artist in Focus: Xu Bing



Xu Bing is renowned for his artistic explorations of the role of language in human life. He was 11 years old when Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. Throughout most of his childhood he witnessed firsthand the written word's power to manipulate masses.

In much of his work, he draws on the calligraphic principle of using words as art. In installations such as *Book from the Sky* (1987), Xu covers scrolls with an invented language (that appears real). In *Square Word Calligraphy* (2004), he blends the English alphabet with principles of writing Chinese calligraphy to create a visual hybrid.

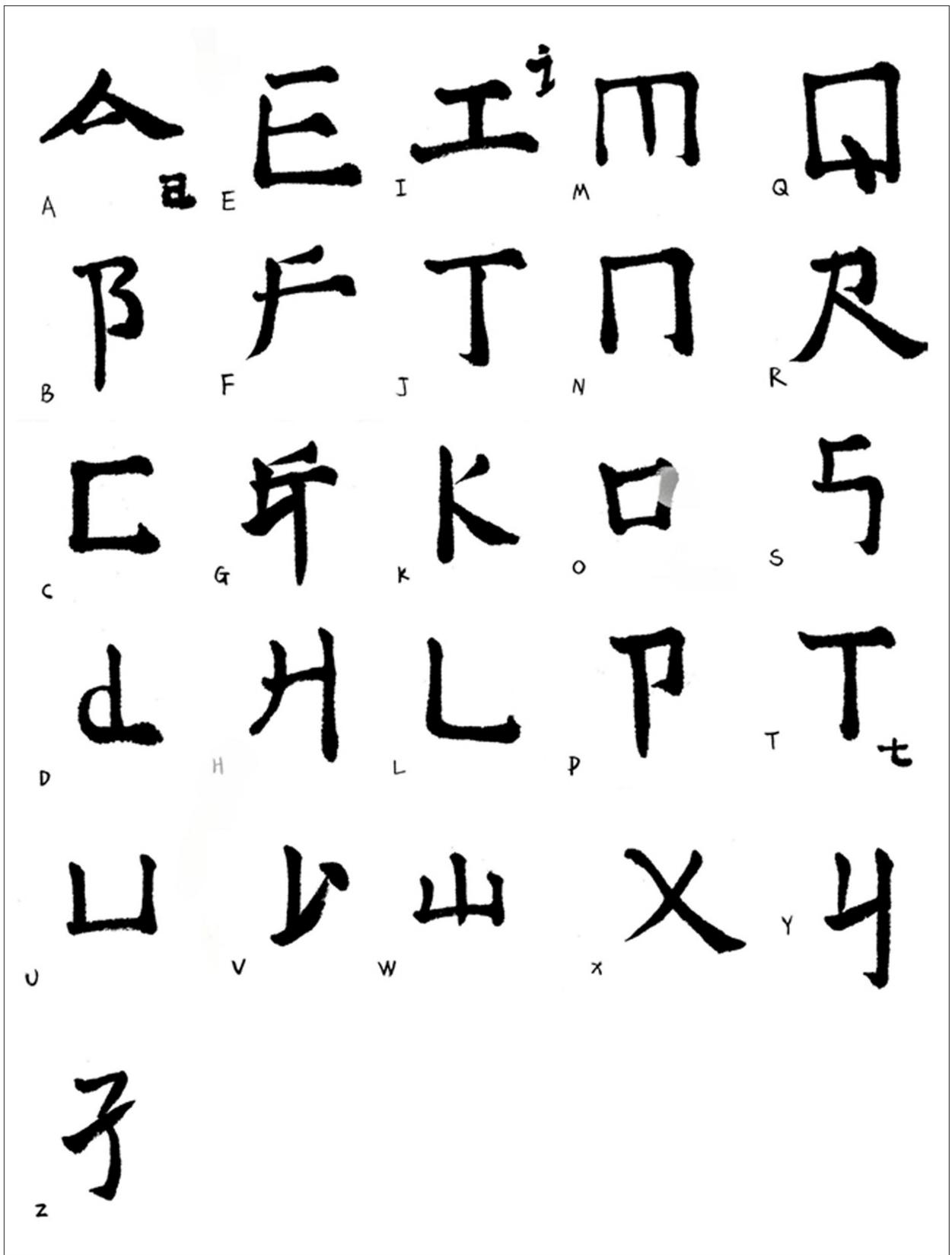
In *The Character of Characters*, Xu Bing draws parallels between the repetitive, rigorous practice of calligraphy and aspects of Chinese culture, both contemporary and historical. You'll see images of the construction of the Great Wall, of mass production in Chinese factories, and of marchers in ordered rows at the Beijing Olympics and in military ceremonies.

It touches on such varied subjects as

- the genesis of writing,
- the connection between Chinese calligraphy and painting,
- the role of copying in art and society, and the trust native Chinese readers place in symbols—including the current Chinese love affair with name-brand luxury goods.



*The Character of Characters*, 2012, by Xu Bing (Chinese, born 1955). Five-channel video animation installation. Acquisition made possible by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, R2012.54



Square Word Calligraphy Alphabet  
 adapted from *Square Word Calligraphy* by Xu Bing  
[www.xubing.com](http://www.xubing.com)

## Activity: Peaceful Poetry

1. Explore your school, home, or community to find a peaceful place where you can escape from the stresses of your daily life. Sketch or photograph this place.
2. Sit quietly for 1 minute, observing your environment.
3. Create your poem.
  - a. Write three nouns to describe what you see.
  - b. Write a phrase or sentence to describe what you hear.
  - c. Write three adjectives to describe what you see or feel.
4. Create an album leaf, fan, or scroll of your peaceful place and poetry. This can be as an ink painting, collage, performance, or any other art form.
5. Share your Peaceful Poetry.
6. Optional: Exchange with a partner and add a comment to your classmate's artwork.

## Activity: Connecting Your Narrative

1. To create your storyboard, use one strip of 4" x 17" receipt paper, or prepare long strips by cutting legal or ledger paper in half. Divide your strip of paper into 5 cells.
2. Watch an excerpt of *The Character of Characters*, 2012, by Xu Bing at [education.asianart.org](http://education.asianart.org).
  - a. Sketch a storyboard of 3 cells recalling one sequence that you observed from *The Character of Characters*. Leave the last cell blank.
  - b. What did this sequence remind you of in your own life? Design your 4th cell to add this connection to your storyboard sequence.
  - c. Design your 5th cell by making a connection between your 4th cell and either the past or the future.
3. Sign your name using the principles of Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy*.
  - a. Paint a square. Use *Holding the Brush* as a reference.
  - b. Inside the square, going from top to bottom and left to right, paint the letters in your name in any size and orientation. See: *Square Word Calligraphy Alphabet*.
4. Share your completed narrative during a gallery or classroom discussion. Be prepared to explain your connections.

For more examples and lessons of Words as Art throughout Asia, visit [education.asianart.org](http://education.asianart.org).