

Impressions in Stone: Contemporary Seal Carving

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TO TRADITIONAL Chinese scholars and artists, the carved stone seal was both a signature and a work of art.

Seals, or chops, as they are referred to today, were one of the earliest means for reproducing the written word in China. Applied to official documents, personal letters and paintings, the seal functioned as a means of authentication, as well as a record of ownership or appreciation.

Scholars collected impressions of their seals in red ink, juxtaposed with a rubbing in black of the inscription on the side of the seal, in books called *yinpu* 印譜. The subject matter of seal carvings include the artist's favourite short verses of poetry, brief quips of wisdom, the names of various people, or pictures of objects. Although a Chinese *yinpu* does not usually have a cohesive theme, my intention in the collection that follows is to communicate through translations and visual images something about the human condition from ancient China.

The subject matter of my seals is drawn from the *Book of Songs*, the oldest known anthology of poetry in China. As a preface to this selection, I offer two seals carved with the words of the late Ming—early Qing scholar, artist and physician Fu Shan 傅山 (1607-1684). His desire to create unpretentious works of art is exemplified by these couplets, which in a few brief lines communicate the very spirit of the poetry in the *Book of Songs*. Primitive, not overly refined, they stand in striking contrast to later Chinese poetry, which became increasing allusive and metaphorical.

It is appropriate that these poems should be illustrated with stone seal prints. Fu Shan sought in his works to express “ugliness, rather than affectation of beauty”, and an intentional “clumsiness”, letting natural forms manifest themselves free of civilizing restraints. Thus I have chosen to carve his couplets on a substance which best expresses the author's aesthetic point of view. The “honesty” of which he speaks can be equated to the “honesty” of the poetry itself, with its message about basic human feelings.

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Better ugliness

Better Clumsiness, than facile
skill
Better Ugliness, than affectation
of beauty.

Better honesty

Better Incoherence, than facile
glibness
Better Honesty, than false
composition.

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A gentle rain at break of day

A thunderstorm at dusk

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I was sent to the eastern hills
For a long long time I could not
come home
I come from the east
The gentle rain comes incessantly
down
A stork cries from the top of
a dirt mound
My wife sighs alone in her room
while she brushes clean the empty
spaces
I am returning home
A round unbroken gourd
still hangs in its place near
the firewood
Three years have passed by since
I last saw it

Wind and rain whip so coldly
Chickens cry in a frenzy
But how can I not be happy?
I see my love returning to me

Land of joy

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Rat pictograph

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Who says rats
don't have teeth
They can bore through my wall
Disturb my peace

Dead deer in the wilds
wrapped in white reeds
Young girl in the spring of womanhood
is tempted by a lover

In the forest a young sapling grows
In the wilds a slain deer
is bound fast by white reeds
The woman is as lovely as jade

“Go slowly through the woods
Lightly touch the ground
Don't tug the hunter's clothes
or make the hunter's dog sound”

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*Don't make
the hunter's dog sound*

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The cry of the deer

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Yo yo, the deer cries
Calling his companions to sample wild artemisia
I gather the best of friends around me
Strum the zither! Pluck the *qin*!
Strum the zither! Pluck the *qin*!
Let the gaiety envelop us
I have the finest wine
to make my best of friends carefree



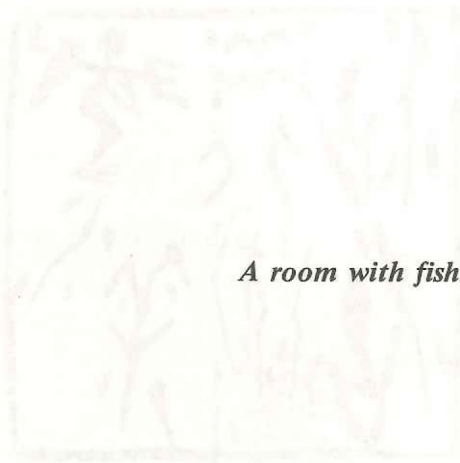
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*The river waters swell
majestically and rush towards
the north with a lively sound*

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Who says the river is wide?
With a small reed boat one could cross it.
Who says the kingdom of Song is far?
Standing on tiptoe one can see it.



A room with fish and eggs



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Oblivious to pain or pleasure
The fish swim deeply in sparkling water

The fisherman

The hunter

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He opens the rabbit net so earnestly
Ding ding, he hammers the stake
How valiant! How gallant!
The protector of our prince!

Dao becomes all under heaven
As brooks and streams flow to rivers and seas

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Dao, the Way

Source: *Daode jing*

The dead end

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If the way changes to prevent passage
then change your ways to find a new route.

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If you don't meet the southern wall
don't turn your head back.

Source: Popular sayings