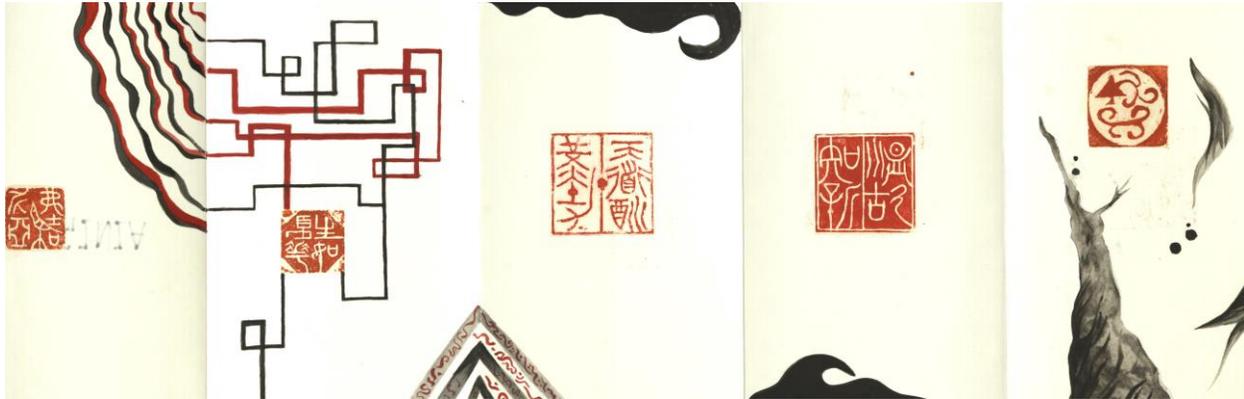


YUCHEN XIE

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## Project Outcome: A Study of Chinese Seal Carving

(May. 2016 – April. 2017)



I've been an abstract artist, too used to think with a big picture in my head and paint with a big brush, yet learning to practice Chinese seal carving and spending a lot of time carving the words bit by bit have developed my craftsmanship. More importantly, the art of Chinese seal carving has made me a more contemplative individual and a better artist, more aware of my own culture and its role in the contemporary world of art.

During the summer in 2016, I was back in my hometown in China and I enrolled in the artist AGui's private class, where I spent several hours a week apprenticing him and developing my own style of seal carving. I finished three seals, relatively larger in size, while studying with him. Later when I went back to Charlottesville, I continue to communicate with him remotely and seek his advice. He has helped me develop greatly, especially in calligraphy, a subject I've been not so familiar with.

When I first encountered seal carving and fell in love with this form of art, I also immediately realized the fact that it's losing its significance as a cultural symbol in China and it's almost dying as an art form. I've been thinking about the reason behind its withering and I started to sense it as I continue practicing the art: the medium itself poses great limit to how far artistic interventions can go. Honestly, there has been a period of time when I started to feel limited by the medium and thought about giving up. But with the help of my mentor Professor Akemi Ohira Rollando and inspirations from the further research I continued, I started to see new visions of my project.



"God helps those who help themselves." ---  
proverb from *The Book of Changes*

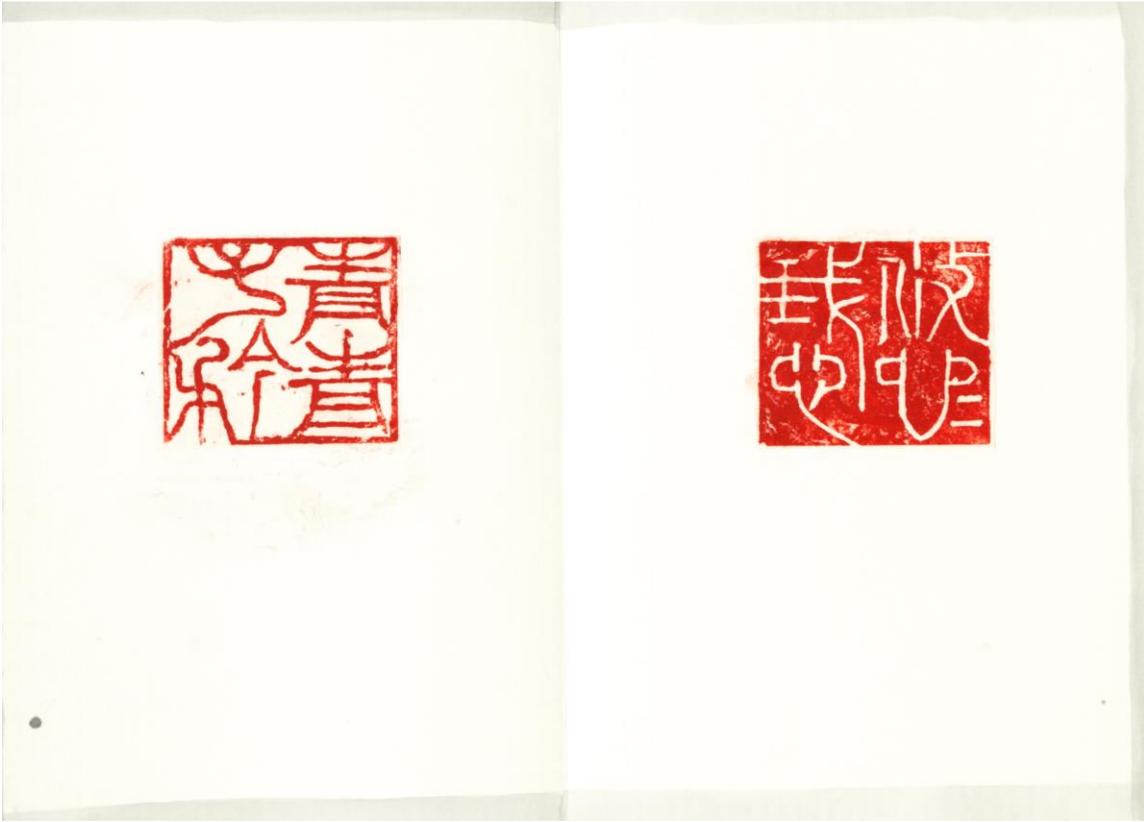


"Learn about the future by reviewing the past." ---  
proverb of Confucius

First of all, the forms of the characters allow for a lot of artistic variations. While a single character already has dozens of distinct looks depending on the time period it's invented, many other more artistic variations can also be made based on designs of calligraphy. Second, the ways these prints are displayed can also be very creative. Traditionally, big seals are simply printed in the exact middle of a blank sheet of paper and smaller ones are printed as a supplement to the artist's signature of a bigger paper-based work of art. However, I want to make the prints of seals interact with the background where they are displayed, so that the entire display is a piece of art where every element is indispensable yet none of them are overarching. Therefore, I used gouache, acrylic, Chinese ink, and markers mostly in black, white and red, to create patterns of painting as the background. Furthermore, I choose the Japanese album style of book so that as the whole book unveils, a sense of flow is created. Even though many of the words and phrases I chose are not connected literally, they are indeed connected aesthetically and intellectually.

My passion for the project grew even stronger when I started to make my own books with these prints of seals I carved. Having discussed with my mentor, I started learning bookmaking techniques with her. I'm currently experimenting with tie-die techniques to make the cover and I got to know a lot of interesting techniques that I've never heard of. Having realized the fact that this is an art based on prints that can be produced as many times as I want, I'm eager to make more variations of different styles of books with collections of my seals.

Despite the artistic insights and craftsmanship I've gained, I've also learned a lot about ancient Chinese poetry and literature that I have never encountered nor learned, even though I grew up in Chinese culture. The two seals illustrated below, for example, are two phrases from a collection of poems first published in around 600BC. Though I've heard about it before since it's a very famous love poem, I've never really studied its meaning, let alone carving it out.



Later, I started to spend a great amount of time researching into ancient poetry in order to choose the ones I like to carve onto the seals. During this process, I learned a lot about the meanings and implications of Chinese ancient poetry and its cultural significance in relation to the historical period it's situated in.

Thus, the entire process of carving a seal, from researching into poetry, designing the forms of characters and layout of texts, grinding the stone, carving out each dot and line, to carefully making the prints and designing the way of display, has been truly inspiring. I learned more than what I have expected from this year-long project.

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