A Ricci Dictionary of seals

An English and French Dictionary of Chinese seals and of the art of seal carving

A Chinese dictionary of Western seals and Seal studies

The “Great Ricci” tradition


In addition to expanding a database which is to become the Perpetual Ricci Dictionary, the Ricci Society is undertaking the publication of two volumes of considerable scientific and cultural interest: The Ricci Dictionary of Chinese traditional Medicine with 12,000 entries will become one of the largest of its kind in any Western language; the Ricci Dictionary of Law is to include more than 20,000 entries.

The Ricci Society is also drawing on a long and rich experience in scholarly research in Chinese studies, and is undertaking the publication of A Ricci Dictionary of bronze inscriptions together with a pioneering new work on seals and the art of seal carving.
Chinese seals, seal studies and the art of seal carving

The earliest forms of Chinese seals are middle and late Neolithic potters’ stamps, and seals were already quite widespread by the 4th century BCE. Official seals made rulings enforceable, signets secured letters and packages, and were carved with auspicious words or patterns. The Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) represents the apogee of seal carving, and is still a basic reference for carvers. In those days, seals were stamped on clay, ordinary craftsmen had these melted in bronze or carved on jade. Red ink stamps were developed when paper came into general use around the 4th century. This evolved in due course into printing.

军曲候印 Seal of the battalion marshal, bronze, Han dynasty, matrix, face and imprint.

As the archaic script persisted in seal carving, scholars developed a keen interest in them from the Tang period (618-907) and pre-eminently from the Song (960-1279). Seals stood for State prestige and power, began to be used as a signature or mark of ownership on calligraphies, paintings, books and works of art in their collections.

Under the Ming (1368-1644) the seal became an integral part of sophisticated culture, becoming an art form in its own right, and a branch of calligraphy. Learned people were then able to work on soft stones such as soapstone, calcite and alabaster, and fully realised they could convey a wide variety of expressions. Painters, calligraphers, and lovers of antiques did seal carving, and still do. Their style is easily recognizable, and as typical of one artist’s as that of Western etchers’ and sculptors’. The activities of hundreds of seal carvers’ societies, publishing of books and journals, exhibitions and training of new talent is a feature only seen in the China and sinicized Asia, and testify to the vitality and importance of “square inches” in the 21st century.

Seals have been part of Chinese culture for more than 2,500 years. They had manifold uses, and have been incorporated into the history of aesthetics. Apart from the History of Government and personal names, seals also have much to tell about the aspirations of all levels of society, with regard to the aesthetics of calligraphy and representation; the appreciation of pictorial art and stones; and about religious beliefs and ritual in China as well as Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Central Asia.
Chinese seals, a subject still seldom researched in the West

Sound scholarship on Far Eastern seals still remains embryonic, even in English. Pioneers like Robert H. van Gulik have partially researched the subject. However, no overall in depth survey of Chinese seals and the art of seal carving – not to mention working out a systematic lexicon of this topic in any Western language – has ever been undertaken. On the other hand, research in China on seals of the World is only beginning, and is limited by the shortage of Chinese scholarship in European history, especially in ancient and medieval studies. *An English and French dictionary of Chinese seals and the Art of seal carving* will provide a reference lexicon for Chinese scholars; as well as for general interest in Chinese culture, for antiquaries and artists willing to explore unknown territories to use. The sister project, *A Chinese Dictionary of “Western” seals and seal studies* will contribute to the study of seals of the World and their historical context in countries where seal carving is a major art form.

The author is one of the few Western experts

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He is the first and only “big nose” member of the Xiling seal carving Society in Hangzhou. This academy was founded in 1904, and is the oldest and best known seal carvers’ association in China.

He included a “Sigillography” section in the *Grand dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise*, and has since published articles on Chinese seals. He writes perfect French, English and Chinese, and has also researched non Chinese seals, including Middle Eastern and Medieval.

![Seal carved by Laurent Long for the president of the Xiling seal carving Society in 2003.](image)
A dictionary serving also as a manual

The first part An English and French Dictionary of Chinese seals and of the art of seal carving will begin with a bilingual essay of some hundred pages on the history, meaning and aesthetic of seals in Chinese culture, enlivened with anecdotes from Chinese texts.

The Zhongguo zhuanke da cidian 中國篆刻大辭典 (Great Dictionary of the Chinese art of seal carving)\(^1\) and the “Sigillography” section in the Grand dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise will provide the basis for this project. The original contribution to the Grand dictionnaire is to be revised and enlarged. The Dictionary will include updated technical Chinese vocabulary, aesthetic concepts, well-known seals, styles, literature on seals and albums of impressions, biographies, carving materials etc in English and French under a single entry. Some Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese terms encountered in Chinese sources will also be covered. Etymological explanations will be provided for Chinese characters when meaningful, prior to defining them. Pictures like seal imprints and rubbings, Chinese woodblocks and line drawings will help make the subject easier to understand. This first part should include around 40 single characters and 1,200 entries.

The second part A Chinese Dictionary of Western seals and seal studies will also begin with a Chinese Introduction on the History of seals, and will be based on the Vocabulaire international de sigillographie\(^2\) and other works. Chinese translations and explanations will be provided for the English and French vocabulary of seals and their History in what is referred to as “the West”.

Appendixes will include seal carving schools and chronological charts, maps and lists of seal carvers’ societies, journals etc.

Finally, an annotated bibliography of reference materials – based on that drafted in volume 7 of the Grand dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise about China – will provide further reading on the matter in both Chinese and Western seal studies.

\(^1\) Han Tianheng, editor, Shanghai, 2003. 993 pages, nearly 6 000 entries.
\(^2\) Conseil international des Archives, Comité de sigillographie (ed.), published by the Italian Ministeria per i beni culturali e ambientali; Rome, 1990. 389 pp., 324 entries.
Some entries for the Ricci Dictionary of seals

An English and French Dictionary of Chinese seals and of the art of seal carving

**baiji** 白芨 *Bletilla striata* (Thunb.) Reichb.f. or *Bletilla hyacynthia* Reichb. f. i.e. **common bletilla or hyacinth bletilla**. Dried bletilla tuber root is commonly used in Chinese pharmacopoeia. When making a wet rubbing of a seal matrix, chips of the root are first steeped in the water used to moisten the side of the matrix. The mucus and starch it contains make paper applied to the wet seal stick better when taking a rubbing of the side inscription on a matrix.

**baitong** 白銅 “white copper”: sometimes referred to in Cantonese as *pak-t'ung*, i.e. **nickel silver**, an imitation silver alloy of copper, zinc and nickel.

**bantongyin** 半通印 “half seal” : a kind of **oblong signet** of which the breadth of the face amounts to half its length. Such seals were in general use during the Qin and Han dynasties.

**Baocun jinshi, yanjiu yinxue** 保存金石 ,研究印学. “Preserve the epigraphic heritage, encourage research in seal studies”: the motto of the Xiling seal carving Society founded in Hangzhou in 1904.

**bushō-in** (Chinese *wujiangyin*) 武将印 “generals' seals” : seals of feudal lords *daimyō* 大名 during the Civil wars war *Sengoku* (1467-1572) and *Momoyama* (1573-1603) periods in Japan.

**chongdao** 衝刀 “rushing the knife” : i.e. carving each stroke with a single push of the knife keeping to a fixed $\approx 30^\circ$ angle from the surface of the seal stone.

**chuanguoxi** 傳国玺 “Great Seal for the Transfer of State power”, “Great seal of Imperial succession”.

Apart from the six Great Seals of State, the first Emperor of Qin is supposed to have had a seventh one carved. Only treatises on Government from the 1st century B.C. do mention it. They say Chancellor and calligrapher Li Si 李斯 (d. 208 B.C.E.) actually wrote the characters for its legend, and that the seal knob was carved with one – or five – hornless dragons *chihu*. Four Chinese inches ($\approx 9.2$ cm) square, the seal is said to have been made with Lantian 藍田 “jade” – in fact, serpentine marble – or carved from Master He's gem *Heshibi* 和氏璧 – certainly turquoise or feldspar from mount Jing 荆山, Hunan. The eight characters legend is supposed to be *Shou ming yu tian, ji shou yong chang* 受命于天, 即壽永昌 “Receiving the Mandate of Heaven, may You live and flourish for ever”. or *Shou tian zhi ming, huangdi shou chang* 受天之命, 皇帝壽昌 “Receiving the Mandate of Heaven, long life and glory be to the Emperor !” The Seal was handed over to the House of Han, and used as the symbol of the transfer of imperial power. Usurper Wang Mang (reigned 9-23) seized it. It was certainly lost during the strife at the end of the Eastern Han, at the turn of the 3rd century. As it became an essential device to gain legitimacy, *every* dynasty searched for it, when it didn’t “miraculously” reappear, echoing the founding monarch’s virtue. Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1125) had a jade copy carved in 1107, more than 4 inches square. Rulers still half believed in it to the Yuan (1279-1368) dynasty, but it had lost all credibility by the Ming (1368-1644). One such seal was presented to Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736-1795) but he had it quietly consigned to the Palace collections. Two successions seals are still extant: these are obvious fakes devised from late materials.
**Fengni kaolüe** 封泥考略 (A catalogue raisonné of clay seals) an album of rubbings from imprints on clay published by Wu Shifen 吴式芬 and Chen Jieqi 陈介祺 in 1898. A pioneering work for the study of clay seals, it displays imprints of genuine official seals rather than those of matrices used as burial artefacts, and renewed scholars’ outlook on those, and carvers’ references.

**fudouniu** 覆斗钮 “Overturned bushel” seal knob : shaped like a truncated pyramid pierced with a suspension hole (Warring States – Han dynasty).

“Overturned bushel” seal knob 王階 Wang Xing, jade seal, Qin dynasty, matrix and imprint, from Guyu tukao 古玉圖考 (An illustrated Catalogue of antique jades) 1889.

**Gushi jigu yinpu** 顾氏集古印谱 (Record of antique seal impressions by Sir Gu) published in 1572 by Gu Congde 顾从德 (b. ca. 1520) a collector from Shanghai. It is the earliest extant album with original seal imprints, and quite remarkable as it lists more than 1750 seals. Printed in 20 copies, only two incomplete ones are left today. Even if it was considered lost 20 years after publication, it was well circulated among Jiangnan scholars, and finally revealed the art of Han seal carvers to people not having their own collection of matrices. It was so popular that a woodblock print edition – *Yinsou* 印薮 (A collection of seals) – was released in 1575.

**hanko** 判子 (Chinese *panzi*) Chop, personal seal in everyday use in present-day Japan.

**huying** 呼應 “Call and Echo” : connections.
This is a fundamental principle in the design of seals, and is quite widely applied to calligraphic features in them as well as to wielding of the knife, be it for any individual stroke, a single character or in a given set of characters.

Some formal aspect like character size, roundness of a stroke, density of composition, a distinctive space, cannot stand isolated – lest it look unnatural – but has to get a tallying/fitting feature elsewhere in the seal. One aspect of overall features, of one’s very style e.g. strength or flexibility, vigour or elegance, a clever or clumsy stroke here must have an echo there. This search for connections involves dealing with spaces, rounded or straight strokes, proportions, lines and their features and so on, keeping away from any care for symmetry.

**Kim Jeong-hui** 金正喜 (1786-1856) Korean seal carver, calligrapher and naturalist.

**lé** (Chinese 例) “[Settle the matter] according to regulations”, legend on 18th century Vietnamese stamps for official use.

**nakkwan** (Cn. *luokuan*) 落款 “final inscription” : Korean painters’ signature seals.

**qianji** 銙記 “affixed mark” : seals of lower Government bureaus and agencies. (Qing dyn.-Republic).
Qianquan yinni潜泉印泥 “Concealed spring seal paste”. Outstanding quality seal paste manufactured in Shanghai under supervision by Wu Yin (1867-1922) style Qianquan潜泉“Concealed spring” one of the founding fathers of the Xiling seal carving Society.

Wang Mian王冕
Wang Mian (1287–1359) style Yuanzhang元章, pseudonyms Zhubang竹堂 “Bamboo grove Hall”, Fanniuweng饭牛翁 “Old man feeding oxen”, Zhushi shannong煮石山农 “Boiling stones highland peasant”; Guiji waishi会稽外史 “Gossip writer from Guiji [present-day Shaoxing]” and Meihua wuzhu梅花屋主 “Master of the Plum blossom chamber”. He was from Zhuji諸暨, Zhejiang, born into a poor peasant family, and sat for Civil service examinations, but failed. He then retired to Nine li Mountain Jiulishan九里山 in the far North of Jiangsu province, and had to paint for a living. An outstanding artist in ink plum blossoms, he also painted bamboos and rocks. He is said to be the earliest scholar to have carved steatite matrices himself, but did not set a trend at that stage.

Seals to be printed as examples of his work:
竹齋圖書 “Books and paintings kept at Bamboo grove Hall”
王冕之章 “Seal of Wang Mian”
王氏 “Master Wang”
文王子孫 “My family is descended from King Wen of the Zhou.”
會稽外史 “Gossip writer from Guiji”

玺
1. Matrix of a seal, seal, signet; imprint of a matrix (generally speaking, during the Warring States period). 2. Imperial seal, Great seal. The first emperor of Qin forbade commoners to use the word 玺. Only His Majesty’s seals could be called 玺 “Great seals”. By the Han however, Empresses and Princes of the Blood came to be allowed it. (Han-Qing. Most imperial seals were called bao寶 after the Tang). 3. Great seal of State (Last years of the Qing-early Republic, South Korea). 4. Often written 鉨: Antique seal, ancient seal (especially in an archaeological context).

The earliest term for matrices and imprints, the 玺 character does not exist before the Warring states period (475–220 BCE). A few examples are found on clay artefacts or manuscripts from the kingdom of Chu, but it is mostly seen of course on Warring states seals. Many variants – all different from today’s standard form – exist. The most frequent, 鉨 – also transliterated 銓 or 銘 – consists in the “metal” radical 金 金, with the phonetic element 人 爾, very often written with the abbreviated form 尔, and sometimes reduced to it 爾. This graph might especially indicate bronze cast matrices. Variants written with the “earth” radical 土 土 instead of “metal” on other Warring states seals 土, and many Han official seals 土 and manuscripts 土 (壁) point out the number of clay matrices in remote antiquity, or clay seals rather than matrices. The present day standard graph 玺 with the “jade” radical 玉 玉 is mistakenly given by Xu Shen as antique script 玉文 玉, as there are no other known examples of it before the Han. But he placed it in the 玺 entry with the “earth” radical. Han seals and manuscripts might have the character written with the “jade” radical, certainly because of the restricted use of the character for imperial seals carved in jade.
Yin 印
1. Seal matrix. 2. Imprint of a matrix, seal. 3. To seal, to print, to affix a seal.

The *yin* character exits from oracle bones’ inscriptions ①. It consists in two elements, *zhao* 𫝐 and *jie* 卐 to be understood as “to press on someone’s head to make him/her kneel down”. *Jie* does stand for a kneeling figure. *Yin* was then the same character as *yang* 卬, which stood for *yi* 抑 “to press, to bear on”. Two examples occur in bronze inscriptions ②; it stands either for *yi* – meaning “to put things in order, to pacify” – or for *yang* 卬, signifying “to look respectfully at”. The kingdom of Qin began calling its official seals *yin* ③. The First Emperor kept the word *xi* for his own seals, and extended the rules of the state of Qin to the whole empire. So, he promoted a verb meaning “affixing a seal” to signify a matrix or an imprint of it. The Qin often have the graph arranged vertically ④, but the Han begin to have it set horizontally ⑤.

Yinchuang 印床: 1. Seal carver’s vice (made out of a hollowed out block of wood, fitted with wedges and chocks or a screw, used to keep the seal stone in position when carving it). 2. (not common) seal box (esp. one to keep a high official’s seal of office).

Yin wai qiu yin 印外求印 “To integrate graphs or features not met with on seals into one”: To refer to archaic script originally devised on bones, bronze vessels, bricks, stone tablets… when designing a seal.
Yuantai yinshe 圆台印社 Round Wall seal carving Society. Founded in Beijing in 1928 by Ma Heng 马衡 (1881-1955) and Liu Bannong 劉半農 (1881-1934) it also aimed at Heritage protection.

Zhao Shi 赵石 (1874-1933) also known under his literary name Guni 古尼 “Stuck in the past”. He was styled Shinong 石農 “Peasant among stones”, his nom de plume being Nidaoren 泥道人 “Clay Taoist recluse”. He was a calligrapher, seal and inkstone carver from Changshu 常熟, Jiangsu. One of Wu Changshuo’s pupils, he evolved towards more rugged and square strength but without stiffness, aiming at the unexpected curve. He dared include ante-Qin archaic graphs within a work in Han seals style. He also carved metal, jade or rock crystal seals. His innovative style has been termed “the mount Yu [in Changshu] trend” Yushanpai 虞山派, and he exerted a great influence on Deng Sanmu 鄧散木 (1898-1963). His daughter Zhao Lin 赵林 (1907-2005) also excelled in regular script calligraphy and in handling the iron brush.

Seals:
仁人之言其利薄 “Speeches by the benevolent don’t pay.”
古泥 “Stuck in the past”, Zhao Shi’s literary name.
君碩五十後作 “Made by Junshuo after 50.”

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Back of the matrix: 印背。
Breaking the seal, to break the seal: 開封、啓封：打碎封泥、封臠、火漆來開信、包裹等。
Cancellation: 廢印，將印章作廢。用鑿子或鎚子破損印面上文字或圖案，而將印身保留，表示該印法律無效。
Clay seal: 封泥。
Counter-seal: 副印。國王、貴族、官署大印之外多用小印。蓋於大印封臠反面以防濫發文書。
Entaille (n. masc.): 版畫刻工用來夾定小型木板的木架。
Intaglio: 陰刻印章。白文印。陰刻，刻陰文。
Obverse of the seal: 1. (兩面印): 印章圖文對掌印人身份較詳細的一面（反義為 reverse）。2. 封泥，封臠蓋印的一面。
Scarab, scarab seal: “聖甲蟲”, 聖甲蟲銅印。古埃及以及接受埃及文化影響地區所用橢圓形小印，薄薄印臺上雕金龜子形銅。
Sceau cylindre: 滾筒印。古代中東文化用的圓柱形印章。
Skippet, seal box: 官署用官印印盒。
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XU Zhongshu 徐中舒:


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祝平珍藏 Treasured by Zhu Ping, steatite, late Qing or Republican, seal face and imprint.