



Creston Books, 2022

2022 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Culture Notes

Eighteen Vats of Water

by Ji-Li Jiang

Illustrated by Nadia Hsieh

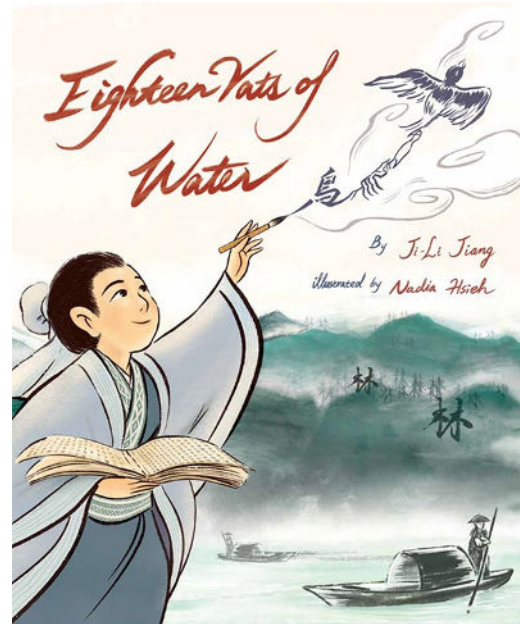
Fiction, set in China

"With truly elegant illustrations in full support of an inherently interesting and original picture book story, *Eighteen Vats of Water* is a truly memorable and highly recommended addition to family, elementary school, and community library picture book collections for young readers."

— *Midwest Book Review*

1. Chinese calligraphy

Chinese calligraphy is a crucial part of Chinese culture. *Shū fǎ* (书法) translates to "the way of writing" and is an art form that draws on language, history, philosophy, and aesthetics. In Chinese culture, the creation of the written language is traditionally attributed to the legendary historian Cang Jie, who was believed to have the ability to interpret and transcribe nature into writing.



The Chinese write and appreciate different kinds of calligraphy styles, using brushes and ink in both calligraphy and painting. The three fundamental elements in Chinese calligraphy are the stroke techniques, the art of composition, and the structure of Chinese characters, while the different writing styles are Regular (Standard) Script, Seal Script (also known as Small Seal), Clerical (Official), Cursive, and Semi-cursive (Running) Script. The tools used differ from Western calligraphy as Chinese calligraphy uses a brush rather than a pen.

2. Brush, ink, paper, and inkstone: the "four treasures"

The Chinese calligraphy tradition recognizes "four treasures": brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. The most important is the brush, whose distinctive feature is its flexibility. This flexibility can be attributed to the type of animal hair from which the brush is created, such as rabbit hair (soft) and horsehair (stiff), and each brush type has a



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unique purpose. The size of the characters is influenced by both the length and thickness of the brush used; that is, the character size should correlate to the tuft size. Additionally, Chinese writing brushes have the important qualities of fineness, evenness, roundness, flexibility, and resilience. While the bristles are used for art, the handles are used for artistic expression and can be made from wood, bamboo, ceramics, precious metals such as gold and silver, and jade.

The two types of ink are liquid ink and ink sticks, which are made from lampblack and glue. Once ground and mixed with water, Chinese ink does not fade like Western ink does upon exposure to light, hence the long-lasting quality of Chinese calligraphic works. The viscosity of ink can be used for artistic expression as well as control of color. Contrary to the Western inkwell's single purpose of holding ink, Chinese inkstones have multiple purposes: they can serve as paperweights, ink containers, or even as art objects. In addition, the quality of the inkstone directly affects the type and speed of ink that is ground; the smoothness/roughness of the inkstone can affect how wet the ink becomes. Lastly, the Xuan paper (often called rice paper) used in calligraphy consists of plant fibers with good surface tension, which affects how the ink appears with different strokes.

3. Various scripts and styles

The various scripts and styles in Chinese complement each other but developed at different times in Chinese history and are used for different purposes.

First, the scripts did not develop along a single chronological line. More than one script could be developed and used simultaneously. The Seal and Clerical scripts, for example, both developed around the Warring States period (403–221 BCE). Research shows that the Clerical Script was developed gradually in the pre-Qin era (221 BCE) and matured in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

Second, the development of the various scripts was not mutually exclusive. That is, the beginning of a new script did not define the end of an old one. The development of Regular Script, for example, helped the Cursive and Running styles mature.



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Third, the exact time of the development of various scripts, especially the Regular Script, is still not settled. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), a large number of calligraphy masters brought the Regular Script to its maturity. [Reference: Li, Wendan, 2010, 100–123.] The earliest examples of Chinese writings are from the Shang dynasty (c. 1570–c. 1045

The earliest examples of Chinese writings are from the Shang dynasty (c. 1570–c. 1045 BCE), in which inscriptions on oracle bones and turtleshell were created as part of divination (hence Shell or Bone Script). About 154,000 of these oracle bones have been unearthed, from which fewer than half of the 4,700 incised characters have been deciphered.

4. The two main characters in this book

王羲之 Wáng Xīzhī [phonetic pronunciation: Wong Shee-Jer]
(303–361 CE) [Chinese calligrapher, the Sage of Calligraphy]

王献之 Wáng Xiànzhī [phonetic pronunciation: Wong Shee-an Jer]
(344–386 CE) [Chinese calligrapher, the seventh son of Wang Xizhi]

“As long as he can remember, Xian has wanted to be a great calligrapher, like his father. Calligraphy is more than writing—it’s painting—and Xian learns how much work and creativity go into what look like effortless strokes. Based on the actual story of Xian and his famous father, *Eighteen Vats of Water* is about determination, creativity, and learning how to see, as well as the importance of family traditions.” —from the back cover of the book.

Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361 CE), known as the Sage of Calligraphy, is the most famous of all Chinese calligraphers. His work represents the summit of the art. Wang Xizhi lived in the Jin dynasty (265–420 CE). During his time, there were three major popular styles of calligraphy: Regular Script, Running Style, and Cursive Style. Wang Xizhi excelled in all three, although he was best known for his Running Style.



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Running Style falls between Regular and Cursive in terms of writing speed and stroke linkage. When carefully written with distinguishable strokes, it is Regular Script; when swiftly written with indistinguishable strokes, it is Cursive. There is no doubt that Wang Xizhi became the greatest master of the Running Style because he had also mastered the Regular Script; his Running Script was firmly built on the foundation of Regular Script. Wang Xizhi passed his talent on to his sons, particularly his seventh son, Wang Xianzhi. The works of both father and son, now known as the "Two Wangs," are among those most treasured in the tradition of Chinese calligraphy. [Reference: Li, Wendan, 2010, 131–132]

5. Calligraphy in China today

Chinese calligraphy has an important role in China. Calligraphy is written or engraved on pottery and antiquities, bridges and other large structures, and even carved into mountainsides. It is a highly prized art form, available for purchase in shops and museums. Chinese calligraphy became an important standard for imperial civil service examinations in the seventh century CE, in which anyone with good calligraphy skills (in conjunction with knowledge of other subjects) was qualified to move up the ranks of bureaucracy. Even today, good handwriting and calligraphy are valued in China, where a person's learning, education, and personality are partly judged by their handwriting capabilities.

6. Key words from the book

书法 shū fǎ [Chinese calligraphy]

晋 Jìn [Jin (referring to the dynasty)]

王羲之 Wáng Xīzhī [phonetic pronunciation: Wang Hsi-chih]; (303-361CE)
[Chinese calligrapher, the Sage of Calligraphy]

王献之 Wáng Xiànzhī [phonetic pronunciation: Wang Hsien-chih]; (344–386 CE)
[Chinese calligrapher, the seventh son of Wang Xizhi]

毛笔 máo bǐ [brush]

墨 mò [ink]



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宣纸 xuānzhǐ [rice paper]

砚 yàn [inkstone]

(The following characters are inside the book cover, for students to study and try to write. Photos added)



日 rì [sun]

月 yuè [moon]

目 mù [eye]

木 mù [tree]

山 shān [mountain]

水 shuǐ [water]



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人 rén [person]

鳥 niǎo [bird]

牛 niú [ox]

貝 bèi [shell]

火 huǒ [fire]

魚 yú [fish]



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References

Li, Wendan. *Chinese Writing and Calligraphy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010.

Jiang, Ji-li, illustrated by Nadia Hsieh (2022). *Eighteen Vats of Water*. Berkeley, CA: Creston Books, 2022.

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