

*Chinese*

*Seals*



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# Chinese Seals

Niu Kecheng



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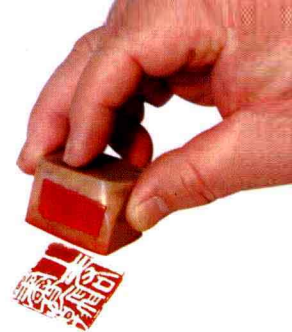
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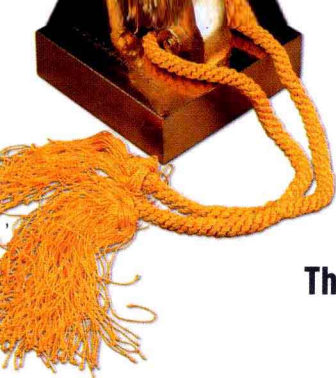
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## Introductory Remarks – Beginning with the Character “Ep” Yin (Seal)



1. The character meaning “seal” from the script cut on tortoise shells and bones in ancient China
2. Yuan Dynasty private seal, family name above and signature below — “Wu Signature” (武押)
3. Yuan Dynasty seal, with characters 趙五 reading “Zhao Wu”

The character 印 “yin” (seal) is found as early as on the inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1100 BC). It consists of two parts, the top part being the pictograph of a hand and the lower part depicting a kneeling person. The combination of the two parts gives the meaning of “using a hand to press a person downward.” Therefore, “pressing down from above” is the usual meaning of the character “yin.” It was originally a verb, but later became a noun as well.

However, during the period of the Shang and Zhou dynasties some 3,000 years ago, a seal was not called “yin,” but 玺 “xi.” But after the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty (Qin Shihuang) unified China for the first



time in history in the year 221 BC, the character 玺 “xǐ” could be used only for the emperor’s seal, and all other seals of both the officials at all levels and the common people were called “yin.” In the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), because many people stamped their seals on the paintings and books in their collections, seals were sometimes called “tushu,” or book. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), personal signatures tended to replace seals, and therefore seals came to be called “ya” or “huaya” (both mean signatures).

New names have appeared for the seal one after another since the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220AD), but “印” and “章 (zhang)” have remained the basic names, and therefore “印章” has become a general term.

The explanation given for “yin” in the *Origin of Chinese Characters*, the earliest Chinese dictionary, by Xu Shen (58-147) of the Eastern Han Dynasty, is “government evidence of credibility.” As a matter of fact, private seals are also a kind of evidence of credibility. Where the reputation or commitment of an organization or individual was to be proved, the affixing of a symbolic mark was the first function of the seal.



An emperor’s jade seal

However, if it were only so, seals would not have become a symbol of Chinese culture, because the form of showing reputation or commitment by using seal marks is not peculiar to China. The peculiarity of the Chinese seal lies in the fact that it was a kind of practical article at the beginning, but in the course of its development its function was gradually extended to the field of artistic expression on the basis of practical use. Its carvers changed from ordinary craftsmen to men of letters and artists. It turned from being a mere symbol into a work of art for appreciation. Like Chinese calligraphy, it is based on Chinese characters as the model elements; like Chinese freehand brushwork painting, it values abstract



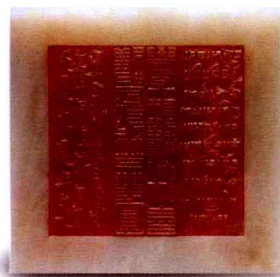
1. Knob of a jade seal
2. Seal cutting







expression; and like Chinese poems, it lays stress on the artistic conception of beauty. At the same time, seal carving and sculpture are equally excellent, although they are different from each other. Therefore, the seal is a multiple artistic form developed in the nourishment of Chinese arts. The multiplicity of this art is also expressed directly through the seal top engraved in the likeness of an animal, and inscriptions or patterns carved on the sides and top of a seal. In its historical process, the seal has undergone all



Jade seal bearing inscriptions in the Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian languages



Large seal with the moon as its theme



kinds of changes in shape, style and taste—from metal casting to stone carving, from stamping in mud to stamping on paper, from the uniformity of the official seals and personal seals to their separation, and from being an article of practical use to being a work of art, and so on. All these changes contain many historical literary allusions. Therefore, the Chinese seal is not only an article for appreciation, it is also an artistic form with profound cultural content, which has kept developing until today through thousands of years. The emblem of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games is a seal with the Chinese character 京 “*jing*” (capital), which is filled with Chinese traditional cultural flavor and embodies the aesthetics of sport. With this emblem, the Chinese seal shows its peculiar charm to the world.



Seal with a poem by Wang Wei



Set of seal carvings with the character 福 (fú, or luck)





## **Seals Are Found Everywhere**

Seals Stamped on Pottery

Seals Stamped on Clay

Seals Stamped on Paper

Seals on Paintings and Calligraphic Works

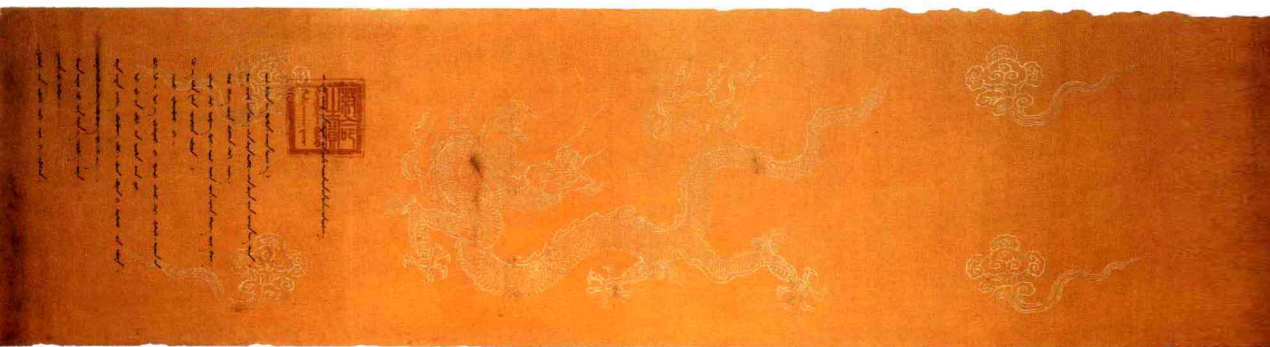


The seal is a product of private ownership, and stems from the time man began to have the idea of owning an article for himself. An ancient man stamped a seal on a small ceramic pot on his own behalf one day, and from then on seals have been found everywhere.

Emperors used seals to proclaim their decrees to their people, officials used seals to exercise their power, merchants used seals to demonstrate their credibility, landlords used seals to enclose fields, and the common people used seals to protect their small properties. Gradually, seals became the representative and evidence of personal identity, and even today we are still using seals.



Seal affixed to a Qing Dynasty banknote



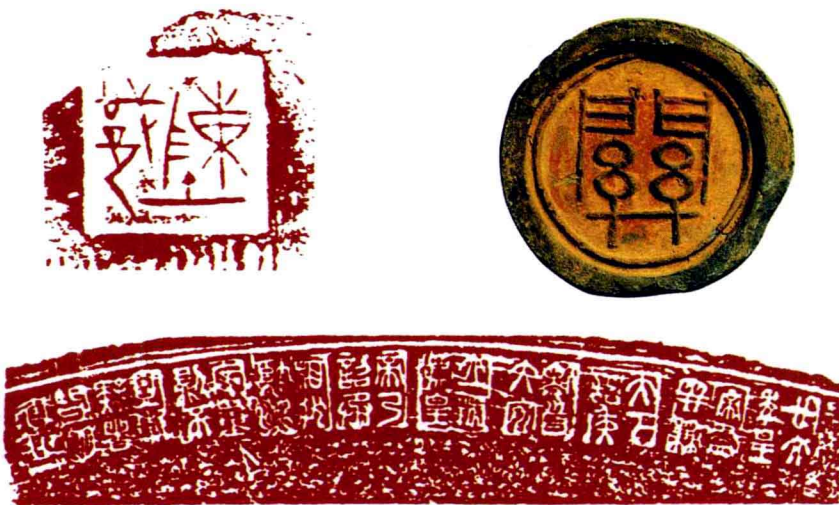
Imperial decree issued by Emperor Shizu of the Qing Dynasty to the Fourth Panchen Lama





## Seals Stamped on Pottery

The earliest seal marks were found on pottery. On a piece of broken pottery unearthed in the ruins of Yin, the capital city of the late Shang Dynasty in Anyang, Henan Province, were found raised characters, showing that there was already something similar to a seal in the Shang Dynasty. It was stamped on the surface of the pot as a certain kind of symbol. In both its use and its symbolic function was very close to those of the seals of later days. The stamping of seals on items of pottery became very common in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States (770 BC – 221 BC) periods. The sizes of the seals were often determined



1. Sealed pottery of the Warring States Period
2. The character “矣” (pass) carved on an eave tile
3. Imperial decree sealed on ceramic ware of the Qin Dynasty

according to the sizes of the pottery items. The stamp mainly indicated the names of the workshops and craftsmen involved in the making of the piece. This was known as “stamped pottery.” After Qin Shihuang united China, imperial decrees issued on uniform weights and measures were either engraved directly on a bronze weight or carved on seals and stamped on pottery. Stamped pottery became a kind of government announcement.

## Seals Stamped on Clay

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, seals were stamped on the clay used to seal letters and other items wrapped and dispatched. Sticky clay was smeared over the knot of the cotton rope used to tie the parcel, and the seal was affixed to this. This was supposed to prevent the package being opened by unauthorized persons.

When a letter was wrapped and sealed, a piece of wood would be added on the bamboo or wood slips on which a letter was written. It was called 检 (*jian*),



1. Sealed clay of the Warring States Period
2. Seal stamped on clay
3. Sealed clay, Han Dynasty. The inscription “平原大尹章” (*píng yuán dà yīn zhāng*) means “Seal of the prefect of Pingyuan.”
4. The informal inscription on this seal, “可以清心也” (*kě yǐ qīng xīn yě*) means “Be carefree.”





and was equivalent to the label in the later days. The wood was carved with a square hole where a knot was made of the rope tying the letter. The knot was sealed with clay on which the seal was affixed.

So far, more than 700 pieces of stamped sealing clay dating from the Han Dynasty have been found in Shaanxi and Shandong provinces.

The seal marks on the sealing clay as a whole bear the names of persons. Seals of officials usually bear their titles, such as



1	2
3	4
5	

1. Slang and pithy remarks were also used in seal inscriptions.
2. The inscription on this seal, “出入大吉” (*chu ru da ji*) means “Good luck coming and going.”
3. The palindromic inscription on this seal, “言顧行，行顧言” (*yan gu xing, xing gu yan*) means “Making good on your promise.”
4. The inscription on this seal, “日利” (*ri li*) means “Prosper day by day.”
5. Seal (representing the authority of the God or the Heavenly Master), used by Taoist masters at rites to summon wind, rain or gods, or dispel evils and comfort the souls of the dead.