



Understanding the Techniques Used by Fang Jiekan in His Bird and Insect Seal Carving

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Abstract

The seal art form of birds and insects is distinct. The fundamental features of Fang Jiekan's bird and insect seal are its flowing, rounded curves, which are complemented by rich variations and delicate bird and insect designs created by the exacting seal process. The cutting ability of Fang Jiekan is bold and precise. The tiny features of the bug and bird seal script are well-expressed by him. With the right density on the sealing surface, his seal works are stable and consistent in form. Well-placed inside the stable and well-balanced arrangement are the several seal script fonts depicting birds and insects. Fang Jiekan's bird insect seal script had a profound impact on the development of seal studies in later generations. His works have not only been widely studied and borrowed by later generations but also made important contributions to the inheritance and development of bird insect seal printing. Fang Jiekan's bird and insect seal script is an important part of the history of Chinese seal studies, with high artistic value and historical significance.

Keywords

Fang Jiekan; bird-and-insect seal script; technique research

1. Characteristics of Fang Jiekan's bird and insect seal script

1.1 Bird head decoration, graceful brushwork

Seal carving "is an art that closely combines calligraphy and sculpture with seal script as the mainstream (Wu Yiren, 2019). Writing seal script is a technique used to engrave seals. All calligraphy styles are based on seal writing and brushwork. The writer categorized the line designs of Fang Jiekan's insect and bird seals. Table 1 shows that the primary characters used in Fang Jiekan's bird and bug seals are primarily fish bodies and bird heads. Three categories apply to this type: fish body style, dragon head style, and bird head style. Of these, the great majority of Fang Jiekan's seal works featuring birds and insects use designs in the form of bird heads. The bird head shape is used in the seals "Zhang Aizhi Seal" (Figure 1), "Li Jushi" (Figure 2), "Xie Zhi Private Seal" (Figure 3), and "Yixietang" (Figure 4).

Classifying the seal works of Fang Jiekan depicting birds and insects reveals that the lines are primarily winding, exhibiting some straightness in the curves, and varying in roundness, tip thickness, and thickness in the center and end. To minimize redundancy, the identical seal content will likewise be shaped in accordance with the seal. The same "fish drink" (Figure 6, Figure 7) text varies in accordance with the variations in the seal stone, as indicated in Table 2, resulting in a distinct visual.

The variations in line thickness and thinness, as well as their roundness and sharpness, highlight Fang Jiekan's all-around strength. The majority of the "王" in "篁" is horizontal in Fang Jiekan's seal "Ku Huang Zhai" (Figure 8), and Fang Jiekan also succeeded in achieving equidistance with a consistent insect body shape. The insect's body is slim, uniform, and mostly coils for harmony, whereas the word "齋" has long curves that are spread symmetrically. The

overall lines of the print "Qiu Rui Xiang Shi" (Figure 9) are stretched upward and downward beneath the two-two arrangement, and they are tight on the left and right. The bird's pointed beak repeats the start and finish, and the word "Gan" in "Xiang" also features little block patterns. Among the seals of birds and insects with a greater curvature is the "Jie Yu Xuan" seal (Figure 10). Subtle and elegant lines are accompanied by greater white space, which presents the overall impression of sparseness. It has numerous, uniformly spaced winding lines. One of Mr. Fang's poems was titled "The style of the spear head, horn and sword, the bird seal script of the willow leaf and silk thread." The author discovered that by combining this collection of bird and insect seals, they all shared the same calligraphic traits: wavy, flowing lines that emphasize the narrow body of the bug and occasionally more slender, flowing lines that emerge after the seal is molded (Lin Mozi, 2014).

Table 1. Comparison of Fang Jiekan's seal script methods (Source: Book *Illustrated Bird and Insect Seals*)











Fang Jiekan's seal character				
				
Figure 1. Zhang Yu-an's Seal.	Figure 2. Pear Club Room.	Figure 3. Xie Zhi's private seal.	Figure 4. Yixie Hall.	Figure 5. Changshui people.

Table 2. Comparison of Fang Jiekan's seal script lines (Source: Book *Illustrated Bird and Insect Seals*)

Fang Jiekan's seal script lines				
				
Figure 6. Fish Drink.	Figure 7. Fish Drink.	Figure 8. Kuhuang-zhai.	Figure 9. Qiu Rui Fragrance Room.	Figure 10. Jieyuxuan.






1.2 The tail is sharp and has a natural curvature

The seal script tails of Fang Jiekan may appear intricate, yet there are guidelines. The author primarily contrasts and groups them into three categories: bug body style, fishtail style, and bird head style. Because seal script is the primary artistic medium for seal carving and because most seal script characters are symmetrical based on the vertical center line, the tails of seal script characters will echo the heads of the characters, giving rise to the characteristic bird head shape of the tails. View Table 3.

A seal titled "White Cloud Mountain Top Clouds Want to Stand" is shown in Figure 11. Comparably, we can observe that most of the bird and insect seals in Fang Jiekan's enormous collection finish as triangular fishtails, as Table 3 illustrates. Fang Jiekan like to use fishtail decorations, whether they are red or white. There are two varieties of this fishtail. The first is an isosceles solid triangle in the seal "Yu Yin Xi Tang" (Figure 12), and the second is a

forked triangle in the seal "Yan Nian" that resembles a chicken foot (Figure 13). To produce the tail of the bird and bug seals, like the "Rao Zongyi Seal" (Figure 14), Fang Jiekan also used the insect body type. This pointy end broadens the range of possibilities.

Table 3. Comparison of Fang Jiekan's seal script suffixes (Source: Book *Illustrated Bird and Insect Seals*)

Fang Jiekan's seal script suffix				
				
Figure 11. Clouds are about to rise on the top of Baiyun Mountain.	Figure 12. Yuyinx-itang.	Figure 13. Prolonging life.	Figure 14. Seal of Jao Tsung-I.	Figure 15. Seasonal music.

The goal of Fang Jiekan's bird and bug seal scripts is to ensure that the characters are accurate by creating the greatest feasible variations. The characters and the seal stone are made to achieve the highest expression effect possible, striving harmony yet difference—that is, the same characters and various seals—whether it be a round-eyed, sharp-beaked bird or the shapes of other insects and fish. The lines are simple, elegant, and stable yet flexible enough to follow the principles without becoming clumsy or ungainly. Many of his seals are composed of four characters separated by a cross-shaped area that is stable, free, and regular.

Fang Jiekan attaches great importance to academic cultivation, and his exploration of seal script can be said to be endless. He believes that without academic spirit in writing and talent in seal script art, it is impossible to obtain the mysteries and mysteries of the Dharma. Fang Jiekan attaches great importance to seal script and believes that "seal script must be mastered, otherwise it cannot be called epigraphy, and the treatment of seal script must be natural, just as the Southern Dynasty painter Sheikh proposed in his book "Record of Ancient Paintings" "that there are six painting techniques: first, vivid and lively atmosphere; second, ancient brushwork; third, pictographic representation of objects; fourth, coloring according to categories; fifth, management position; sixth, transferring and modeling." The selection of the seal script also pursues a vivid and lively atmosphere. Mr. Fang Jiekan's extensive seal carving works have confirmed his seal carving technique (Ji Zhiqian, 2022).

2. Application of Fang Jiekan's bird and insect seal carving knife technique

2.1 Punching is the main method, and rounding is the secondary method

Fang Jiekan frequently completes his seal carving projects by "punching and cutting" with a knife and by thinking about making concessions. Using only a punching knife, the imitation Han jade seal can be finished since it has fewer variations and simpler lines than bird and bug seals. More knife skills are required to finish Fang Jiekan's bird and bug seals because of their intricate and beautiful structural design as well as their individual attractiveness. This procedure confirms that expression forms call for expression strategies. The secret to Fang Jiekan's success with his seal works featuring birds and insects is also found in his special knife technique.

Seal carving has a long history, but Fang Jiekan's seals with birds and insects are unique. His "knife-moving method" lends a touch of originality to the construction of his bird and bug seals, in addition to his distinctive seal carving technique. You can easily see that Fang Jiekan is skilled at completing the lines in many of his bird and bug seals by combining cutting and punching. The "Zhang Yuanzhi Seal" (Figure 16a), for instance, has a very clear geometric pattern imprint design at the bird's tail in addition to the traditional bird head decorative design. The upper part of the "Hall" in "Yixie Hall" (Figure 17a) is designed using geometric composition under symmetrical processing, and the beauty of changing lines is achieved through punching and cutting.



Figure 16a. Zhang Yuanzhi Seal.



Figure 16b. Part.



Figure 17a. Yixie Hall.



Figure 17b. Part.

Source: Book *Illustrated Bird and Insect Seals*.

The Seals of Birds and Insects by Fang Jiekan have a distinct "metal and stone flavor". Using both "punching knife" and "cutting knife" simultaneously to portray his unique brushwork, as well as fully expressing the "metal and stone flavor" of the lines through variations in line thickness, are some of his skillful uses of knife skills. In a manner similar to Fang Jiekan's "sharp beak bird head" bird and insect seals, the bird's beak is severed after a brief pause, forming a sharp beak, and the bird's head is progressively carved out using the "push knife" almost completely. Punching knives are typically used by Fang Jiekan to create the final shapes of birds and insects.

The complete seal surface lines can also be coordinated differently with this type of knife technique, which enriches the line changes on the seal surface by contrasting the small curves at the point where the strokes and triangular blocks meet.

Fang Jiekan is renowned as a jade-cutting expert mainly because of his vibrant knife talents. Precise and complete lines are maintained in the seal style with a heavy metal and stone flavor. In particular, the bird and insect seals' rounded corners "cut" out various patterns, preserving the composition's rigidity while enhancing its vibrancy, elegance, and beauty. Fang Jiekan's seals depicting birds and insects have a unique beauty due to their strong knife skills and impressive literary accomplishments.

We can observe that many of his seal carvings were produced on jade materials. Jade has a naturally brittle and hard texture. While it is easier to work with when carving seals and allows the seal maker greater creative freedom, it also has a definite handcrafted quality. The intricate carving of insect and bird seals places further demands on the artist, demonstrating once more Fang Jiekan's mastery of jade cutting.

The unique attribute of Fang Jiekan, praised by Huang Baoxuan, Zheng Wuchang, Pan Boying, and many others, is his "jade-cutting method" with a knife. In the last century, the seal carving community took great pride in his "Elephant Scroll Treasure" seal carving, which was mostly made in the form of tile ends. He had crafted ivory scroll heads specifically for Zhang Daqian's collection of twenty old and well-known paintings. During his lifetime, Fang Jiekan carved almost 40,000 seals, demonstrating his exceptional diligence as a seal carver. The collection of seal carvings by Fang Jiekan that is currently on display is only the beginning.

Fang Jiekan adopted seal carving as a sedimentation in his long-term creative accumulation, inspiring many of today's young seal carvers. He always upholds the "uprightness" of Chinese culture and follows the correct road, whether in art or academia. His extant writings and artwork effectively convey his idea of "uprightness," as he practiced "seal carving follows the Qin and Han dynasties," painting follows the Song and Yuan dynasties, and poetry follows Li Bai and Du Fu. This created an atmosphere of respect for the audience.

Additionally, he made art a part of Chinese culture as a whole by fusing poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving. Consequently, at the time, Mr. Fang was more often referred to as a gold and stone master than as a seal carving. He followed his own unique style rather than imitating the ancients, nevertheless. His seal carvings had an impact on this period. A wide range of well-known modern seal carvers with distinct styles, including Tong Xuehong, Xu Wuwen, Han Tianheng, Lin Jiandan, Zhang Ruyuan, Ma Yizhao, and Liu Yiwen, were his disciples. This further illustrates the fact that a competent instructor frequently lets his pupils learn a great deal instead of imparting his own style. Exactly the cornerstone of pupils' education is his "keeping the right path."

2.2 Alternate your grip when using both splitting and slicing

An image of Fang Jiekan named "Old Knife Hand" was once painted by Huang Yongyu. Fang added a note to the

portrait: "No matter whether it is fine gold and unpolished jade, rhinoceros and elephant, or insect script, bird seal, or hanging dewdrop and needle, as long as it suits the style, I will just play with the knife happily, indulge in it freely, and not stop until I am satisfied." On the one hand, this is indicative of Fang Jiekan's proficiency with seal carving, which he stressed over and time again in his theories regarding seal learning. However, it also demonstrates Fang Jiekan's attempt to achieve naturalness in his seal carving.

His lines are occasionally accompanied by faint, jagged edges since he holds the knife like a pen and can naturally employ the strength of his wrist when engraving. This is not only because of what he learned from the Zhejiang School in his early years, but it's also possible because of the way he moved the knife forward, and slightly swung his wrist, which helped to create this natural line effect.

Seal carving emphasizes the use of the knife, whereas calligraphy stresses the use of the brush. The knife can be held in three different ways: with your fist, with your three fingers, or with your five fingers. Only the first gripping technique differs when compared to calligraphy, as does its direction and angle. Auxiliary knife techniques are other knife skills used in seal carving. It is evident from the gathered picture data that Fang Jiekan utilized the five-finger holding method for cutting seals, but it is clear from a series of seal works including birds and insects that the three-finger holding method was employed when analyzing the knife technique. The rich lines of seal carving works can also be attributed to the employment of these knife-holding techniques.

Fang Jiekan is adept at using knives, primarily for punching and slicing, with the occasional addition of additional knife techniques and knife holding techniques to express the meaning of seal. He is serene and giving, and he controls complexity by using simplicity and complexity to simplify. Knowing knife skills, he "not only conveys the wonders of seal, but also makes up for the shortcomings of seal, and uses knife skills exquisitely, so that seal and knife skills complement each other," according to his understanding of the art. One may argue that one of the endearing stylistic elements of Mr. Fang Jiekan's bird and bug seal is his basic knife art practice combined with his thorough mastery of knife abilities.

3. Fang Jiekan's bird and insect seal script layout

3.1 Modeled after Chinese seals, the sealing surface is symmetrical

Fang Jiekan's success in bird and insect seal script was also due to the solid foundation he laid by copying Han jade seals. Only by finding the composition methods of Han Dynasty craftsmen in terms of virtuality and reality, density, unity, balance, thickness, relocation, separation and combination, increase and decrease, repetition and response, etc., can we find these methods, which have been carefully studied for a long time and are indeed the composition principles that have been tested in practice.

Table 4. Comparison of Fang Jiekan's Composition Methods (Source: Book *Illustrated Bird and Insect Seals*)

Fang Jiekan's Analysis of Composition I



Figure 18. Yuyinxitang.



Figure 19. Ji Qu.



Figure 20. Tang Yun's private seal.



Figure 21. Clouds are about to rise on the top of Baiyun Mountain.



Figure 22. Dashi Hall.

The balanced type serves as the foundation for most of Fang Jiekan's seal carving design, with modifications made based on the number of characters in the sealed text. Fang Jiekan prefers the balanced style of layout, as shown in Table 4, whether it is from the imitation Han jade seal or the bird and insect seal.

The symmetrical seal surface properties are also observed in the seals of birds and insects created by Fang Jiekan.

For instance, in Figure 18's "Yu Yin Xi Tang" (Table 4), the left side of the letter "Yin" has more strokes than the right, yet the lines are still elegant and flowing, following the left-right symmetry to give the subject a harmonious beauty. A four-character seal has more material than a two-character seal, such as "Ji Qu" (Figure 19). The vertical strokes of the two characters constitute the characters' frames because they must be finished on a square seal surface. Every character's total seal surface area is dictated by the number of vertical strokes it has, and these strokes need to be altered.

Fine red characters are arranged in a balanced manner in the "Tang Yun Private Seal" (Figure 20), which is comparable to the Chinese seal with white lettering that was discussed this morning. An example seal with a shape attached is the "White Cloud Mountain Clouds Want to Stand" seal (Figure 21). Owing to the arc formed by its edge, the seal characters' environs are likewise reshaped, with the surroundings stretching equally and the center getting tighter.

The "Dashitang" seal (Figure 22) has delicate, thin lines with organic corners. The subtle brushstrokes prevent the seal surface from being overly sparse. Fang Jiekan adds curves to make it appear fuller. The lines' ends continue to be tied in a fishtail fashion. The "tang" portion employs a beaked bird's head as a pattern to mimic the tail, giving the lines further variation and changing the area artistically with fewer strokes.

3.2 Exaggerated design, bold contrast

There is a general consensus regarding the balance of Fang Jiekan's seal-cutting efforts. Still, based on the various kinds of seals that Fang Jiekan frequently encountered, there are certain pieces with flamboyant patterns and compositions that employ elements like blocks to substitute single lines or through huge and little beads dropped on a jade plate, the arrangement is placed in an ordered fashion.

Table 5. Analysis of Fang Jiekan's Composition (Source: Book *Illustrated Bird and Insect Seals*)

Fang Jiekan's Composition Analysis II



Figure 23. Youhe.



Figure 24. Han Tianheng.



Figure 25. Zhangshi Daqian.



Figure 26. Yongjia Dai Jiaxiang's Seal.

Table 5 illustrates how "Youhe" (Figure 23) differs from earlier prints. It has a lot of long, curved lines that go through it both horizontally and vertically. While keeping an overall balanced structure, the lines are more varied, and the bird and insect patterns are more exaggerated. Fang Jiekan's student's name stamp is represented by the seal "Han Tianheng" (Figure 24). The start and finish of the strokes on this seal are primarily shaped like pointed beaks, making it distinctive. For instance, "天"s initial stroke has the appearance of a fish's body, and the asymmetrical shapes are displayed in the symmetrical parts in an echoing fashion, emphasizing the difference.

Another name seal is "Zhangshi Daqian" (Figure 25). The bird and insect patterns are richer and more pronounced than on other seals. Characters "氏" and "千" have different designs. The former has a head like a dragon, while the latter is made up of animal body blocks. These two characters stand in stark contrast to the prior single-line composition. A bold and inventive composition that enhances the variety of lines.

A sensation of space large enough for a horse to run through is followed by the seal "Yongjia Dai Jiaxiang's Seal" (Figure 26). The material is stricter because of the border. "Dai" is a single character with complex but not superfluous strokes. A triangle is incorporated into the strokes of "Xiang". This seal, like most of Fang Jiekan's seals, is symmetrical and balanced overall. It has rows but no columns.

Certain bird and bug seal characters by Fang Jiekan feature multiple layouts at once, while others only have one symmetrical, exaggerated, or crisscrossed layout. Sometimes, instead of existing in isolation, these layouts bleed into one another.

The techniques used in seal carving art to produce the surface effects of seals, which are its technical components and language of expression, include the seal carving method, the knife method, and the layout method.

The seal technique, knife technique, and chapter technique in seal carving art are the methods of producing seal surface effects, which are the technical elements and expressive language (Li Mingheng, 2022). An emphasis on order is always present in Fang Jiekan's seals. There is a distinct visual language, daring block design, inventiveness in tradition, and a word approach that is altered as much as possible, all based on the idea of tracing back to the Qin and Han periods. The layout is somewhat balanced because of the word change approach. Four characters are evenly divided over the sealing surface in the majority of insect and bird seals, which have a balanced pattern. Aside from having a flat, structured, flowing, and organic layout, some pieces feature two-, three-, or five-character bird and insect seals. Han Tianheng once commented that successful practice promotes the deepening of his theory, and scientific theory sublimates his practice. He became an outstanding seal engraver and engraver who provided us with two spiritual nourishment of printing art and printing studies in the 20th century (Fang Jiekan Art Museum, 2001).

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