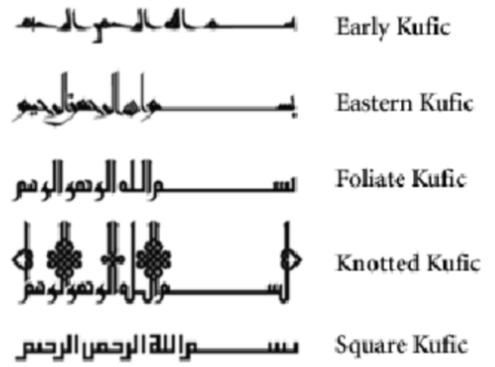


ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY

The Beginnings: Qu'ran & The Evolution of Kufic

Over the years, the original Kufic script used to transcribe the Holy Qu'ran, has evolved into many variants. The modern squared Kufic design piques my interest because of the geometric precision and light/dark contrast the letters create when tiled.



Source: Research Gate



Royal Mosque in Isfahan
Source: Wikimedia Commons

I found that Kufic is less used in text today, but more as architectural decoration on mosques, palaces, and schools, as well as in logos and flags.



My attempt at the word "Peace", or سلام



Source: Britannica

I noticed that the flag of Iran has "Allahu Akbar", *God is the Greatest*, inscribed in the square Kufic form 11 times on both sides, representing 22 Bahman (anniversary of the Islamic Revolution). This signifies to me how much Arabic calligraphy plays a role in both religion and national pride.

Islamic Designs & The Silk Road

One of the greatest similarities I've noticed between Islamic and Chinese cultures is the pottery. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644AD) is well-known for its blue-and-white ceramics.

I was surprised to learned that during the Ming Dynasty, the blue cobalt oxide used was often sourced from central Asia, particularly Iran. The Silk Road allowed extensive trading and sharing of cultures and techniques. For example, arabesques and floral tessellations began appearing in Chinese pottery over time, while pictorial elements like dragons, phoenixes, and the Ming "grape design" become apparent in Islamic pottery.



China, 14th century, with Middle-eastern vessel shape
Source: Wikipedia

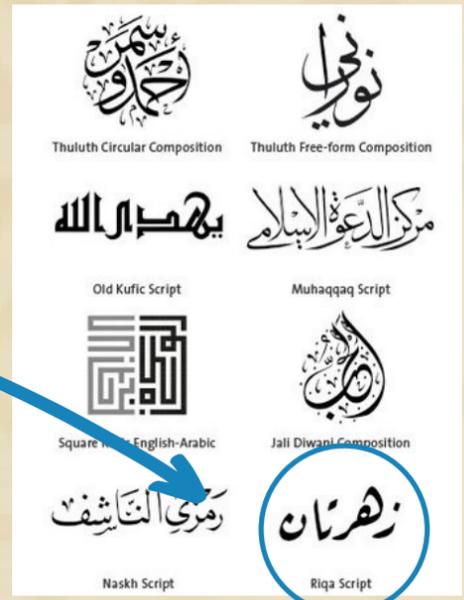


Persia 17th Century, plate with dragon
Source: Wikimedia Commons

The only difference is that in Islamic art, blue and white represent the heavens and thus, the grandiosity of Allah. On the other hand, Chinese cultures see blue on white as the nature and blooming of spring, hence the reason why Ming porcelain often depicts rivers, trees, and other scenery.

My Journey into Calligraphy

Functional vs Stylistic Scripts



Beijing, 2008, with my brother and teachers
My writing: **大聖不作 (left)** in Regular script

When I moved to Beijing in 2008, I was introduced to the world of Chinese calligraphy. Just like with Arabic, there are a variety of writing styles. I find great similarities between **Riq'a** and **楷书** (circled in blue). They are more functional than stylistic, and are primarily used in official documents and everyday writing.

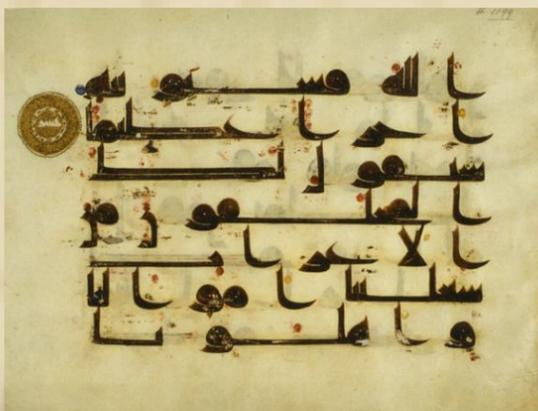
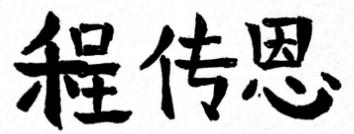
Challenges and The Qu'ran's Dilemma

The hardest part for me when learning Arabic calligraphy is the linking. This is because the distinction in final/medial/initial forms adds so many more stroke combinations.

In Chinese calligraphy, there are a defined set of strokes that make up each character, which makes the number of strokes one has to learn much fewer. In addition, Arabic calligraphy poses an additional challenge of diacritics. I learned that because early Kufic did not have nuqtas/diacritical marks, it was difficult to comprehend and agree on the exact meaning of the Qu'ran.

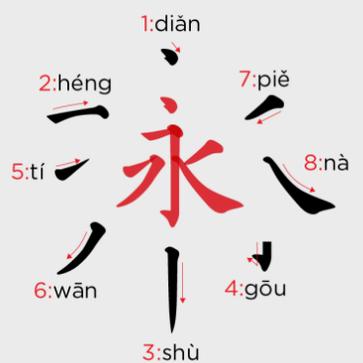


My name, Vivian Cheng (程传恩)



Source: Middle East Eye

This question intrigues me: **how did interpreters decide which diacritics to add to the original Qu'ran? How did they make sure to capture the true meaning of the Holy Book?**



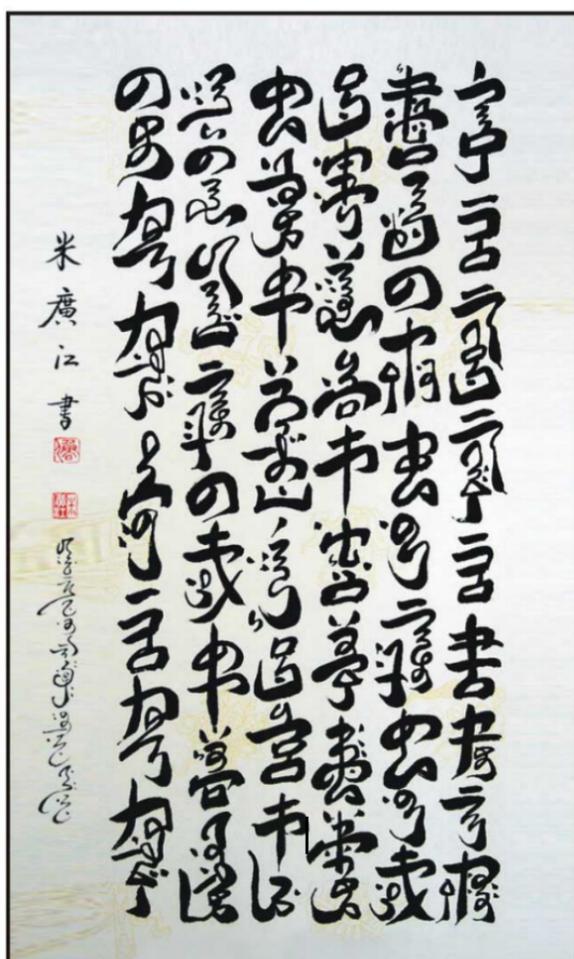
Predefined strokes in Chinese calligraphy

Source: <http://ichinesematters.blogspot.com/>

Sini, An Amalgam of Cultures

This is one of the coolest pieces of art I've ever seen. Haji Noor Deen Mi Guang Jiang is a master calligrapher who writes Arabic letters in the shape of Chinese characters. While it is aesthetic to me, as someone who reads Chinese it is also visually confusing because I feel like I should be able to read each character, but if I look closer I realize I cannot actually understand it.

Knowing that Sini exists gives me a newfound sense of appreciation for calligraphy and its creative abilities to merge the intricate arts and beauties of many cultures.

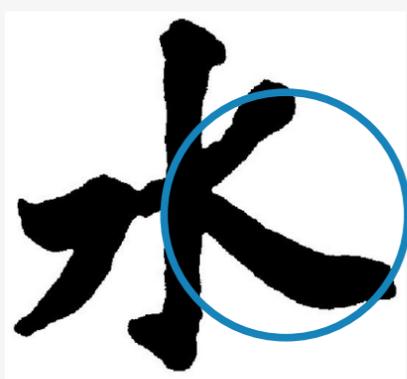


Source: Barakah.co.uk



My Attempt at Sini: Words

After examining some words in Chinese/Arabic, I noticed a striking similarity between كلب (kalb), and 水 (water), particularly the rightmost strokes formed by the ك.



水: water in Chinese

كلب: dog in Arabic

In order to merge the two words, I would need to orient the ك, ل, and ب such that it looks like 水, but still keeping the connected forms and diacritical marks. Thus, I decided to write the initial form for ك and medial form for ل, but write the ب so that it forms the leftmost two strokes of 水.



Finished result

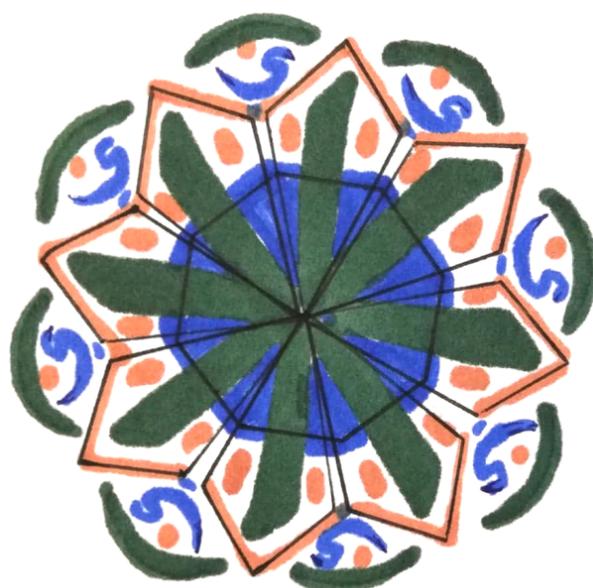
My Attempt at Sini: Design

Another one of Master Haji Noor Deen Mi Guang Jiang's notable artworks is a rounded design with repeating motifs like the letter alif, and pictorial motifs like fish. I wanted to emulate this artwork with my own interpretation of Islamic art learned from class.



Master Haji Noor Deen's artwork

Source: www.bahath.co



4-fold Islamic design with "alif" and "ya"