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Word for word

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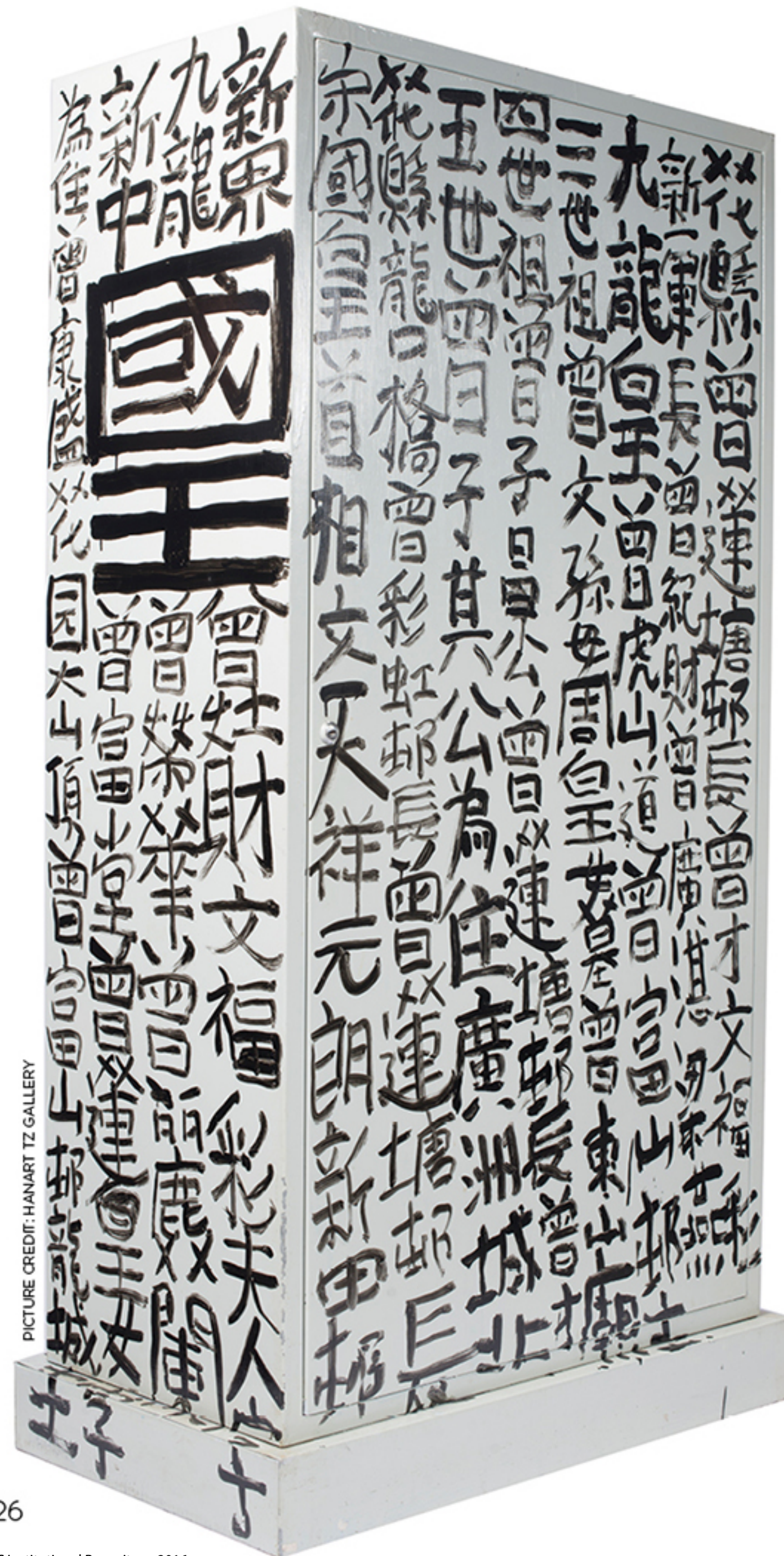
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WORD FOR WORD



PICTURE CREDIT: HANART TZ GALLERY

Chinese written characters are a vast and intricate language. *Eunice Tang* explores their complexities and the artists turning them into works of art

The Chinese language is universally acknowledged to be one of the most difficult languages to learn. Seen as the 'living fossils' of ancient China, it's the only original ancient writing system that has survived into modern age, while others like Egyptian and Mayan have succumbed to the test of time.

One of the earliest findings of Chinese writing is the oracle bone script, ancient incisions on animal bones dating 1500BC to 1000BC. What a lot of people find difficult to comprehend is that the Chinese language does not have an alphabet system as Western languages do, rendering it seemingly illogical to non-speakers. Instead, there are thousands of glyphs or strokes that visually depict or symbolise abstract concepts, which often hint at the meaning of the word.

The complex aesthetics that are intrinsic to Chinese writing has led to the art of calligraphy. Interestingly, despite the dizzying variety of combinations of strokes that make up characters, there are only a handful of traditional writing styles, namely clerical, cursive, semi-cursive and regular script. Calligraphy in China has long been regarded as not only the prestigious form of art required of any serious scholar, but also an identity and building of a person's character. Wang Xi-zhi (303-361AD) is probably the most celebrated calligrapher and his texts

PICTURE CREDIT: ASIA SOCIETY HONG KONG CENTER

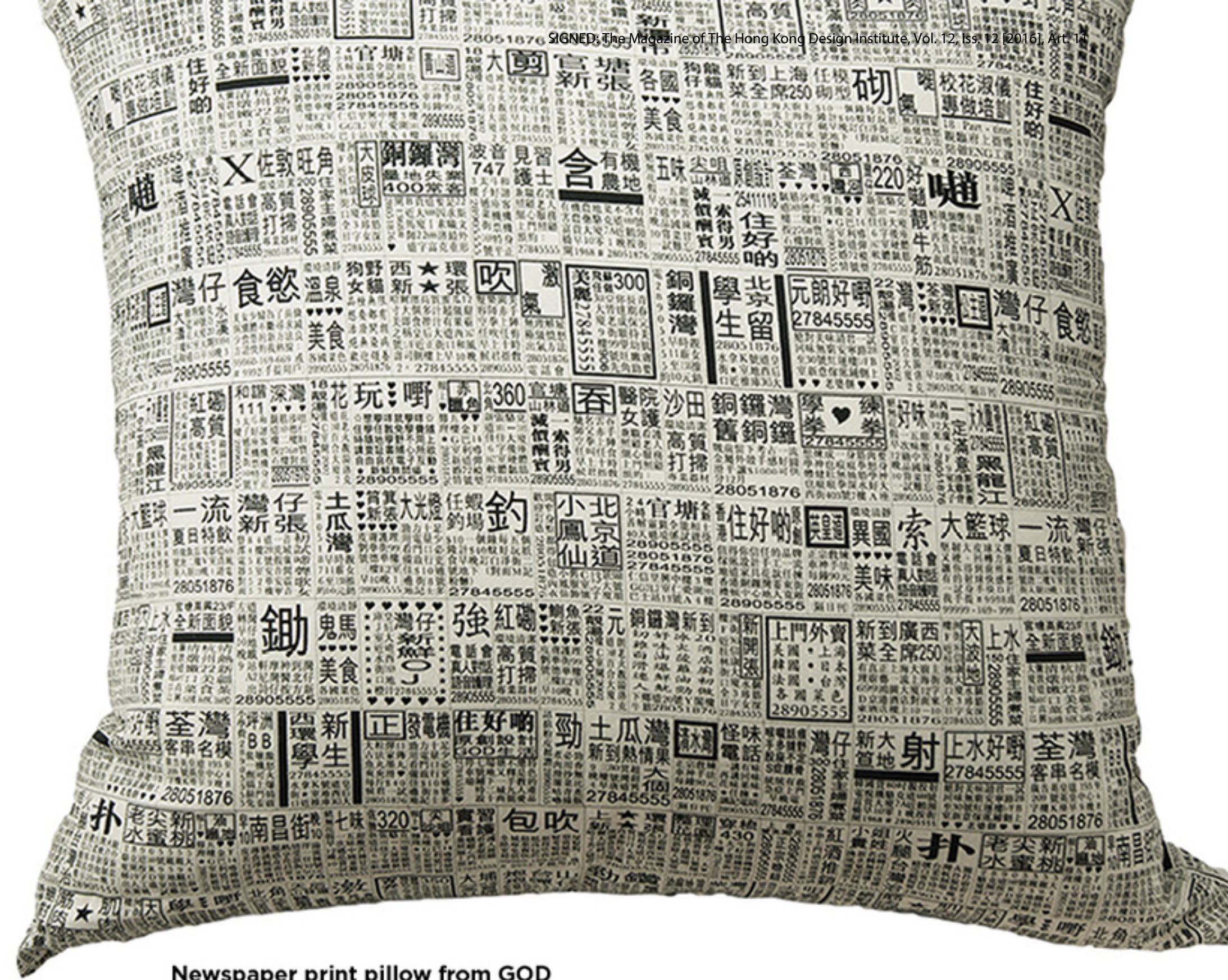


Bird language by Xu Bing
Opposite: Calligraphy on an Electric Box by the King of Kowloon

have influenced generations of artists. Excelling in every script, particularly the semi-cursive, or the running script, legend has it that rearing geese played a part in his producing calligraphy – Wang claimed that he mastered the key of wrist movement by observing how geese moved their necks.

In the modern age, it is apparent that there are far fewer varieties of Chinese fonts compared to Western typography. This is due, in part, to the difficulty of producing fonts with such a large variety of glyphs, while, in contrast, a typographer only needs to design 26 characters for English fonts. But that hasn't stopped artists and designers from playfully exploring Chinese typography.

Douglas Young, is the founder of Goods of Desire (aka GOD), a Hong Kong-based store selling creative and witty designs. Inspired by the city's own vibrant culture and energy, Young plays with the clashing of East and West, age-old traditions and cutting-edge technology. He often adapts vintage neon signs, old Chinese newspapers and traditional 'Prosperity' rice bowl designs with a contemporary twist. "Typography is a form of calligraphy for the digital world," says Young. "Like calligraphy itself,



Newspaper print pillow from GOD

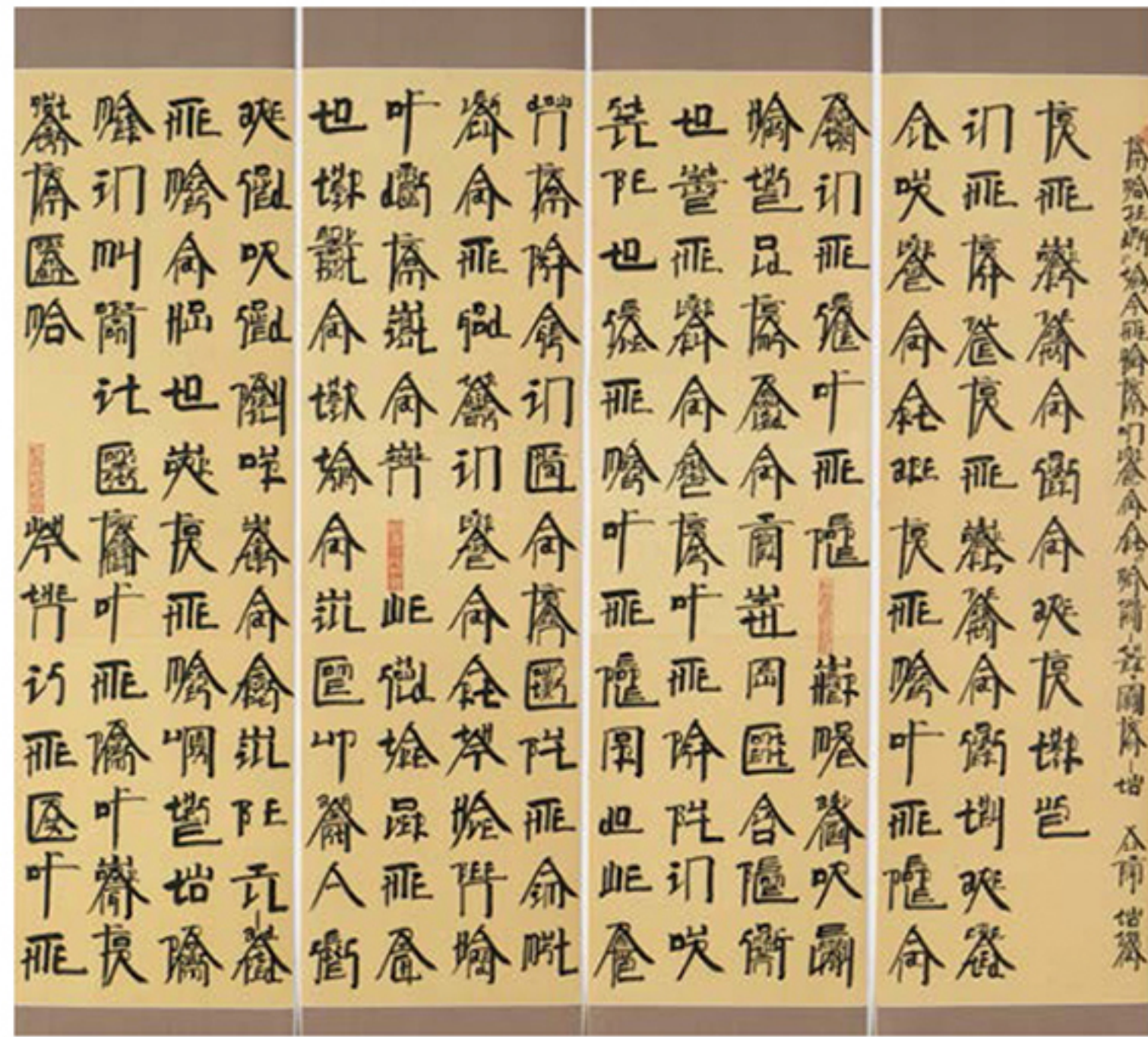


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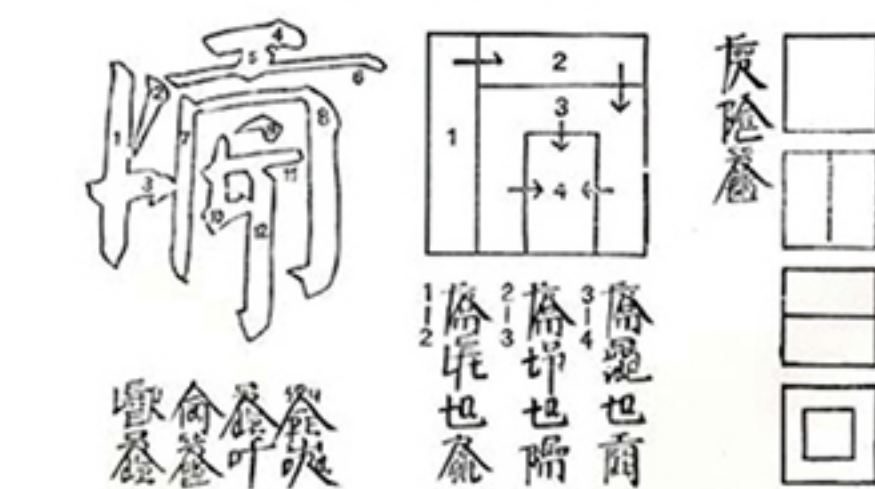
Neon sign apron design from GOD

Calligraphy in China has long been regarded as not only the top most form of art required of any serious scholar, but also an identity and building of a person's character



Xu Bing's Square Word calligraphy

拾	庚	广	冂	丁
吁	身	斤	冂	口
峯	A	H	口	V
	B	工	P	山
	C	丁	Q	X
	D	K	R	Y
	E	L	5	子



it should be considered as art and a means of cultural expression." When asked his favourite typography representative of the city, Young chooses the iconic but slowly disappearing pawn shop symbol. "Legibility is the most important. People still look back to old fonts because some classics are hard to beat in terms of legibility," Young explains. "Also, by sticking to classics, one avoids drawing too much attention to the choice of the font itself."

Tsang Tsou-choi (aka the King of Kowloon) – who died in 2007 – covered the walls, electricity boxes and streets of Kowloon with his painted symbols and poetry. He would paint messages over and over again that proclaimed his 'right' to the land – Tsang claimed that his ancestors owned Kowloon and that he had a claim to the area, though this was never substantiated. The large painted calligraphy he used and the tightness of the spacing became like a pattern on the walls, making it instantly recognisable as his work.

Xu Bing, one of the most prominent Chinese contemporary artists with an international career, has been turning Chinese calligraphy on its head since 1994. Exploring a potential link between English and Chinese characters, he developed a brand new system called Square Word Calligraphy. Xu meticulously reinterprets each letter of the English alphabet into an individual Chinese glyph written with ink. "The order is like Chinese: from left to right, top to bottom, outside to inside," explains Xu. "You'll find out the order when you read the alphabet. You really can get a sense of the letters." What is so ingenious about his Square Word Calligraphy is that it's able to achieve the almost impossible task of transcending design, art, culture and language. As Xu says, "Through my calligraphy, Western people can really get into calligraphy art. I hope my art is not only restricted to the museum or the art world."

With tens and thousands of glyphs and characters, Chinese writing remains arguably the most complicated and fascinating of all. It is an art form in itself, with infinite space to delve into the possibilities of innovation through calligraphy and typography.