Drawing Code
East meets West
Learning Methods Inspired by Chinese Traditional Culture

Han Dai-Yu

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**Notes**
Drawing Materials

During my first years in the United States, I taught an adult watercolor class. In one lesson, I let my students paint a flower, however, one of them complained because she had not purchased the ‘right’ kind of red that she was formally advised she needed in order to mix the color. I was surprised at how much prominence she put on materials over her own skills. One needn’t put so much stress on the materials used for drawing.

Shortly after, I visited an art supply store and was shocked at the amount of materials I saw there, both professional and student quality. There were so many different types of pencils, varying in shape and form, various brands, and various quality. Pencil sharpeners, sanders, and smudging stumps surrounded me. I was very confused at this excess and why it is needed. Overtime, I found that some of the tools were useful, while others remained unnecessary.

I wondered how to teach my students in a different manner. I wanted to teach them to take advantage of available materials, and improve their training of the eyes and hands. Art supply stores are packed with all different sorts of products, but the usage of different materials are not as important as one’s skill to observe and analyze what you are drawing. I do not want them to only rely on certain materials to form a drawing. Most instructors let their students measure the composition using a pencil or ruler. In my eyes, drawing is a kind of exercise; it is a way of coordinating your eyes and hands to work together to record your experience. So if tools, such as a ruler, are relied on too heavily, then it may disrupt the partnership of eye to hand. When being trained in drawing, a principle of simplicity should be followed.

One should not rely on certain materials to form a drawing. However, one should understand why and how to use the materials and tools that they do choose.
**Tip: How to Sharpen the Pencil**

The pencils that come in the drawing kits are either shaped with a very small tip or are not sharpened at all. I ask my students to buy utility knives, or box cutters (preferably ones with wide blades) to sharpen their pencils with. A one sided blade can scrape away the wood until a half inch of lead, cut into a diamond shape, shows. The sides, not just the tip, of a pencil must be used, so the way it is cut is very important. A long, diamond edged lead allows for turning of the pencil so that the best side and condition may be used. I think this is a more artistic method, the pencil being more akin to a sharpened graphite stick. It has more usage this way, as opposed to the usual single point.

**Tip: How to Hold the Pencil**

To do a big scale drawing instead of sketching on the notebook, the pencil should be held as if it is a stick. You will not be holding it in the same position as if you are handwriting. Pretend your hand is in a mitten, and grasp the pencil with your thumb facing you. When you make drawing strokes, your knuckles should lightly graze the paper. This will help you draw straighter lines and let you cover a wider range of motion with your wrist.

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My Drawing Tools: Utility Knife, Pencils (HB, 2B, 3B, 4B, 6B) and White Plastic Eraser. (Notice that I have not sharpened the HB pencil yet.)

Student Drawing, Pan Jie, Pencil (5B, 4B, 3B) on Paper, 24X18 in.
The Four Treasures of The Study Room

In China we call the writing brush, ink-stick, rice paper and ink-stone the four treasures, for these objects are all you need to make artwork. They are treasures of a typical Chinese study room.

The brushes are classified into “Hard”, “Soft” and “Both” three groups, with different functions of tips. The brushes can be made of goat’s hair, wolf’s hair, rabbit’s hair, yellow weasel’s hair, deer’s hair, leopard’s hair and many, many others. The handle of the brushes made of bamboo, wood, porcelain and lacquer, as well as some pearl inlay, ivory and jade.

The ink-stick is the unique pigment for Chinese art, which is made by burning pine or some other kind of wood in earthenware jar, mixing ash and glue and compressed into an ink stick.

The paper was invented by Cai Lun during the Eastern Han Dynasty. “Xuan-zhi” (Chinese rice paper) produced in Xuanzhou (Anhui Province) is the finest paper for Chinese art.

The ink-stone is the most important treasure that can be handed down from ancient times.

Seal, penholder, brush pot, paperweight are also usual tools of Chinese art, some of these are also considered as study room treasures.
To Shoot Without a Bow and Arrow: A story passed down from Liezi, a sage of Daoism during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, 772-221 BC

There is a traditional Chinese child’s story that comes to mind to exemplify this Eastern idea called, “To Shoot Without a Bow and Arrow.” The story is about a famous archer named Jichang and how he learned to shoot without a bow and arrow.

At the tale’s outset, Jichang lives in a town called Handan and dreams of being the top archer in the world. He finds a master named Feiwei who is known for painting a few leaves on a willow tree red and then shooting them from hundreds of feet away. Jichang asks to follow him and learn his technique. Feiwei tells him he must do basic training of his eyes and learn to always keep them open. Jichang tries and finally succeeds by watching his wife weave. He would lie under the machine and watch it move day and night. After two years, he no longer shut his eyes. He returned to Feiwei at that time that told him he did well, but that his next task was to train his eyes to turn small things into big things. He went home and tied a string to a flea’s leg and tied it to the wall. He watched it for three years. After that time the flea looked as big as a wheel. He returned to his master who told him he was now ready to try archery. He easily shot the painted red leaves and Feiwei told him that he was a good archer, but Jichang was not satisfied with this. He still sought to be the best in the world and so he planned to kill his master.

One day when they met, Jichang quickly drew an arrow and shot, but Feiwei was faster and turned and shot back. The arrows hit head on and fell to the ground. This happened many times. Jichang had a sixth arrow but his master had run out. Jichang shot, but Feiwei caught the arrow in his mouth. Jichang was shocked. Feiwei said killing him would be no use and that he must go visit the real master in the mountain, saying that his technique was like the sky compared to their earthly skill.

Jichang went to the mountain. He met the master and immediately began to show off, but the master was not impressed, saying that Jichang only knew the basics. He told him to climb atop a rolling rock and try to shoot off it. He climbed but could not stand stability and so could not shoot. The master then easily stood on the rock and pointed to two birds that were flying in the sky. The master said that he could shoot them down but Jichang incredulously replied that he didn’t have any arrows. The master said he didn’t need any, with that, he raised his arms and made a shooting gesture. The two birds fell to the ground (In China this is a kind of Chi, energy). Jichang was shocked and followed the master for 12 years hence.

After that time he returned to the town, but as a totally changed person. He never showed off and was very humble. He went to see Feiwei who was surprised at the change in character he saw. He told him that now he was truly the best archer. Though he was widely recognized as such, he never competed. When Jichang was very old, he went to a friend’s home and saw something on the wall and asked what it was. His friend ignored it at first, but he asked again. He friend was taken aback and replied it was a bow that he had given him when he was young. Jichang had never attempted archery after returning and had forgotten what a bow looked like. When he died, everyone remembered his words “Shoot without a bow or arrow.”

This is Chinese logic; the higher the technique, the simpler it should be, all you should need is yourself. So I thought I could teach my students my Chinese theory and message. In this book, I will talk about how to use more organic materials to master drawing technique, to train the eyes to coordinate with the hand.

When I draw, it costs nothing. I use my eyes as the lens of my heart to see, and use my mind to follow the seeing. I always draw this way, but I have practiced it for years. For beginners, however, basic tools must be chosen as a conventional way of training.
Selecting the Correct Pencil for the Paper

Pencil and paper work together, and so you must choose them together. A hard pencil (H-HB) works best with hard paper, and a soft pencil (2B-6B) draws better on soft paper. I recommend considering the quality of the paper first, and then coordinating which pencil will work best with the paper's texture/surface.

I suggest using either newsprint or drawing paper (sometimes called charcoal paper as well). Newsprint is good to use for exercises, quick sketches, or gesture drawing when using a figure model. Drawing paper is a little thicker and is used for more finished, or fully rendered, drawings.

A hard pencil draws very lightly, however, it can hurt the surface of the paper and is difficult to erase. A soft pencil also can be used to draw lightly and is easy to erase. A layer of soft pencil hatching is a good base. You can bring in a harder pencil into the later stage of a drawing for detailed hatching work.

I would suggest a softer pencil for newsprint, for its thin surface with rip under the pressure of a hard pencil. 7B-8B pencils work best for newsprint. I normally do not use them with anything else because they, even though seemingly produce a darker line due to the soft graphite, reveal the grainy texture of the drawing paper. HB-B grade pencils work nicely on drawing paper.

For beginners I recommend only purchasing newsprint and drawing paper of medium quality (70-90lbs.). Both kinds of paper should be acid-free, so that they do not yellow and break down over time. Your newsprint should be smooth not rough, because it will take the drawing materials in a different way. However, it should not be too smooth that the pencil/charcoal will not have anything to hold onto. It should just have a fine tooth.
Han Dai-Yu, *Asphodel*, Pencil Sketch, 11X8 in.

Han Dai-Yu, *Guard #3*, Charcoal on Chinese Rice-Paper, 45X90 in.
Shopping List of Drawing Supplies

1. Graphite Drawing Pencils – any brand (HB, 2B, 3B, 4B, 5B, 6B, 8B);
2. Erasers – white plastic;
3. Kneaded Rubbers – FABER-CASTELL or SANFORD DESIGN 1224 or 1225;
4. Charcoal Pencils (med 2B/soft 4B/ex.soft 6B);
5. Packets of vine charcoal (soft) and compressed charcoal;
6. Chamois;
7. Conte Crayon – Any brand, black;
8. Ink and Brushes (medium-sized round);
9. Graphic Knife with sliding cut-off blade – OLFA utility cutter H-1 or professional knife SVR-2;
10. Newsprint pads (smooth) 18”X24”, 50 sheets, 35 lb;
11. Drawing Pads 18”X24”, 24 sheets, 80 lb;
12. Sketch Books – Spiral-Bound, hard cover, 8 1/2 X 11;
13. Drafting tapes – Blue, Painter’s Tape or Magic 810 1 ROLL;
14. Portfolio to carry/store drawings – at least 20”X30”;
15. One drawing board, 20”X26”.
Han Dai-Yu, Southern Hills in Autumn (Detail), Ink & Brush, Collage on Paper, 63X126 in.
Han Dai-Yu, Untitled, Pencil on Paper, 24X18 in.