



# Curriculum Connections

## *Eighteen Vats of Water*

by Ji-Li Jiang

Illustrated by Nadia Hsieh

Fiction, set in China

Creston Books, 2022

2022 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

*Chinese calligraphy is graceful and expressive, as poetic as a poem, as rhythmic as dancing, and as melodious as music.*

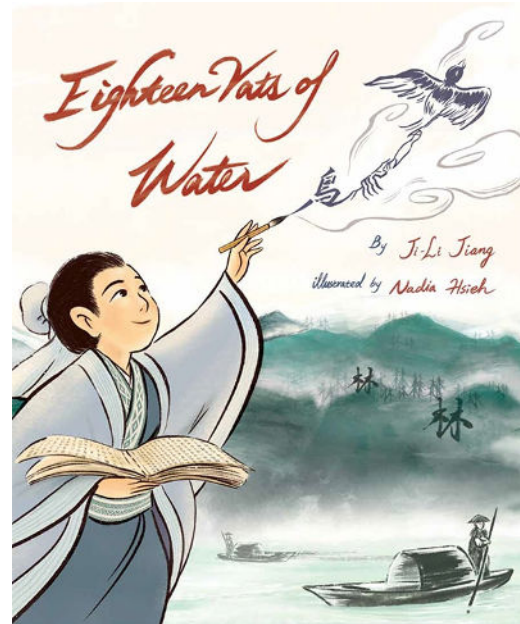
—*Eighteen Vats of Water* (Author's Note)

**Appropriate for Grades:** Pre-K–10

**Best for Grades:** Pre-K–10

### Introduction to the Book

*Eighteen Vats of Water* is a tremendously inviting book with its beautiful illustrations, engaging story, clear themes, and imaginative use of Chinese calligraphy. At first glance, the book appears to be aimed at emergent readers—and it certainly works in that capacity, especially used as a read-aloud text for Pre-K through Grade 4. Perhaps, however, its best application is in the art (history) classrooms for Grades 5–10.



*Teacher's Note: The author's note and illustrator's note in the back matter are essential reading prior to using this book in the classroom.*

### Best Matched Curricular Unit Themes

- Chinese calligraphy (Art)
- Persistence (English)
- Illustrating with Chinese brush and ink (Art)
- Jin dynasty (History)

### Essential Questions

- How does artistry hide in the everyday?
- How does abstraction add meaning to an idea?
- What is "true" persistence on the journey toward mastery?



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### Key Vocabulary

1. Vat
2. Calligraphy
3. Stroke
4. Jin (historical period; pronounced JEEN)
5. Xian (character name; pronounced SHE-ANNE)

### Essential Background Information

- A. Before teaching this book, which explores the origins of Chinese characters and calligraphy, it might be worth looking at a brief video about the origins of the English alphabet. ([Video: Origins of ABCs](#))
- B. Several Chinese characters are camouflaged in the book's illustrations. The following list provides some of the characters, their romanization, meaning, and where they can be found in the story:

王 (Wang): the protagonist's family name (on forehead of cat)

林 (lin): forest (on wooded mountainsides)

☉ = 日 (ri): sun (in place of the orange sun)

山 (shan): mountain (where mountains appear)

鳥 = 鸟 (niao): bird (attached to bird's tail)

Below are several suggested cross-curricular activities, followed by several suggested discussion/writing prompts. The activities are listed in the order in which the material appears in the book.

### Suggested Activities

**Front Cover Examination.** Before reading the book, ask the students to look at the cover. Discuss the level of abstraction for the bird as opposed to the boy. What special features do the trees have? Does anything else catch their attention?



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**Matching Game (Inside Front Cover).** On one side of a handout, provide students with the pictures from the inside front cover (the sun, the moon, an eye, etc.), and on the other side of the handout, provide the Chinese character (日, 月, 目, etc.). Ask students to draw lines matching the pictures and the Chinese characters—making their best guesses.

**Mixing Ink.** Using inkstones and brushes, practice mixing inks with more or less water to see how it affects the different strokes. Find different images (frog, swan, bridge, etc.) and try different amounts of ink to draw them with Chinese calligraphy brushes.

**Basic Strokes.** Practice copying some of the basic Chinese strokes ([Resource](#)).

*Teacher Note: to avoid ink and paper, Chinese brushes can simply be wetted with water, and students can practice writing characters on concrete or a blackboard. The water quickly evaporates, so that they can reuse the same space again and again to practice.*

**Hidden Chinese Character Search.** Send students on a Word Search, looking for characters hidden throughout the book. The characters listed in the Essential Background Information can be included in the lists, as can characters found on the scrolls and paintings in the backgrounds.

**Similar Characters — Different Meaning.** Xian's father adds a single stroke to change his son's character from 大 (*dah* = big) to 太 (*tie* = very). Students first try to spot and describe the difference in the brushstrokes that make up these two characters. Students can write the phrase 太大了 (*tie dah-luh* = too big) and then draw a picture to capture the meaning of the phrase and imbue it with spirit. Advanced: They can try to hide their characters in a picture that illustrates something too big.

**Paint an Animal.** Each student selects an animal illustrated in the book, or they may choose their own animal to illustrate using a brushstroke technique similar to what is used in the book.



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**Character Scrambles (Inside Back Cover).** Provide students with scrambled character sets (for example, the sun character set). Then ask students to try to put the images in order of their Chinese character development. This can lead to discussions of favorite types of characters, descriptions of the attributes of particular characters, and categorization.

### **Suggested Discussion/Writing Prompts**

**Facial Expression.** Look at Xian's facial expression when he gives his father a page of calligraphy to which his father adds a tiny stroke? How is his facial expression different from earlier in the story? What does it reveal about his attitude?

**Spirit in Characters.** Do you believe that every character must possess "spirit" in order to come alive on the page?

**Persistence.** How do characters in the story show persistence? What are some of the biggest challenges to being persistent? Is there anything you want to master that will require persistence?

**Calligraphy.** How is writing English different from writing Chinese? Is one more artistic than the other?

**Apocryphal or True.** Do you think the story of the eighteen vats is based on a true story or is it merely apocryphal? Does it matter if it is true or not?

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