

Asemic Writing in Asia: Script, Gesture, and the Poetry of Meaning

By

Ms. Komal Gupta

tejaswiniaura@yahoo.com

Abstract

Asemic writing is a form of writing that looks like language but does not have a fixed meaning in the way it is presented. It exists in the spaces between writing and visual art, where marks, lines, and symbols are meant to be experienced rather than read. This article explores how asemic writing has roots in Asian traditions such as Chinese calligraphy, Japanese Zen brushwork, and sacred scripts like Siddham, where writing has long been valued for its visual and spiritual qualities. It leans into the connections and offshoots of this unusual artform of script writing and paintings with traditions of the Asian region. It also highlights contemporary artists such as Xu Bing, Wang Dongling, and Nikheel Aphale, who experiment with invented or distorted scripts. The article includes the author's own asemic drawings, where lines and symbols form what can be seen as an imagined script of memory or time and show the innate awareness of artists and writers. With these examples, asemic writing is presented as a meeting point between poetry, drawing, and reflection, encouraging viewers to experience writing through movement, rhythm, and visual imagination rather than forced reading and common interpretations. It is a unique art form that expresses thought, spirituality in a form that defies the constricts of language, leaving the artist and viewer free to understand and explore the meanings of the invented script.

Keywords

Asemic writing, Asian calligraphy, visual poetry, contemporary calligraphy, invented scripts

Introduction

“I think asemic writing is a wordless, open semantic form of writing that is international in its mission. How can writing be wordless, someone may ask. The secret is that asemic writing is a shadow, impression, and abstraction of conventional writing. It uses the constraints of

writerly gestures and the full developments of abstract art to divulge its main purpose: total freedom beyond literary expression.”

Michael Jacobson- Writer and Curator of The New Post-Literate.

Asemic writing refers to marks that resemble writing but do not carry fixed semantic meaning. It is an unusual craft and invites one into the realms of intuitive imagination. Asemic writing is a form of mark-making that looks like writing but uses no readable words or fixed language. It creates the aesthetics of a script or text while leaving meaning open for the viewer to sense, rather than to literally read.

The word derives from the Greek *a-* “without” and *sema-* “sign”, meaning writing without specific linguistic content and meaning. Instead of communicating a readable message, asemic writing invites viewers to interpret shapes, rhythms, and gestures as per their understanding. It exists at the intersection of literature and visual art, where writing becomes image borne and the act of mark-making itself become expressions of intuition and energy.

The term "asemic writing" originated in 1997 when Australian visual poet Tim Gaze and American poet Jim Leftwich independently coined it to describe their experimental, illegible calligraphic works. By the late 1990s, their term sparked a global movement and has been documented by Tom Gaze's in his book, ‘An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting’- 2016.

Although the term asemic writing gained recognition in the late twentieth century, the core philosophy resonates strongly with Asian artistic traditions. Across Asia, writing has been understood as being visually expressive and letter-based throughout the centuries. Brushstrokes, rhythm, and the artist’s inner state hold as much importance as the words themselves. Contemporary Chinese calligrapher Wang Dongling observes, “Calligraphy is not only writing; it is the movement of the spirit through the brush.”

In many ways, asemic writing extends this tradition. It transforms writing into a space of openness and freedom, where gestures, silences, and vivid imagination replace the literal meaning that we are used to.

As Tom Gaze, the modern pioneer of asemic writing, has said "A short definition of 'asemic writing' is “Something which looks like a form of writing, but which you can't read.” “We humans don’t think in words. There’s a deeper level, which only condenses out into words as

the final stage... Some of the asemic writing feels true to me, in ways that words cannot achieve."

Historical Influences in Asian Traditions

Asian visual culture has, through the ages, blurred the boundaries between writing and art. In Chinese calligraphy, brushstrokes embody rhythm, balance, and channel qi -the flow of energy. In highly cursive styles like Caoshu, the grass script, characters often become fluid and abstract, morphing into forms that resemble asemic writing. Even when the text becomes difficult to read, its movement and emotional intensity can be experienced. Asia's asemic legacy begins with the Tang dynasty in 8th-century China. Calligrapher Zhang Xu stunned contemporaries with his wild cursive Kuāngcǎo- the mad grass script, slashing ink across paper in drunken frenzies, showcasing his inner emotions and artistic energy. He is known to have often used his hair as a brush!

Similarly, in Japanese Zen calligraphy, Shodō – ‘The way of writing’, spontaneity and mindfulness rule. Zen monks traditionally practiced calligraphy as a form of meditation. This practice involved creating brush marks in a single, uninterrupted movement. Zen master Hakuin Ekaku highlights the philosophy behind the practice: “The brush reveals the mind.” In conscious movement, the mark drawn becomes a trace of awareness rather than a purely linguistic symbol.

In South Asian traditions, Buddhist scripts like Siddham were sacred visual forms with texts. Mantras written in elaborate patterns became devotional images as well as written language. Similarly, yantras and tantric diagrams integrated letters, geometry, and symbols into intricate visual compositions. These forms demonstrate how writing in Asian traditions has functioned as art, language, and spiritual symbols altogether.

Contemporary Asemic Writing in Asia

Modern asemic writing has developed into an art form as artists began intentionally producing writing-like marks that resist interpretation and have no apparent meaning. Chinese artist Xu Bing, whose installation ‘Book from the Sky’ – ‘Tiānshū’, contains thousands of invented Chinese-like characters that are printed in traditional book form. None of them are readable, although they resemble authentic script. The book, with four volumes totalling 604 pages, was printed in a single print run of 126 copies between 1987 and 1991. It

was first publicly exhibited in October 1988 in Beijing's National Art Museum. Xu Bing explains the effect of his work: "When people try to read it and fail, they begin to reflect on the nature of language itself."



Image 1: Book from the Sky

Contemporary calligraphers such as Wang Dongling have also extended calligraphy into fluidic abstraction through large-scale 'chaos calligraphy'. Energetic and wide-bodied movement-based gestures dissolve everyday, normal characters into pure artistic movement. Characters are interwoven and threaded until they become indecipherable while maintaining original structures. Meaning takes a new form.



Image 2: Wang Dongling's Chaos Calligraphy

In India, contemporary artist Nikheel Aphale transforms Devanagari into what he calls a 'formless form' where letters merge into loops and flowing gestures. The running theme of his works is the visual memory of script while foregoing readability. It is like turning writing into a visual meditation, a core essence. With distortion, repetition, and movement, the script becomes spiritually expressive in gestures rather than language that can be understood.



Image 3: Nikheel Aphale's Formless Form

Asemic Drawings as Visual Poetry

Within this evolving field, contemporary poets and visual artists are exploring asemic writing as a form of visual poetry. In my own creative practice as a poet and budding artist, I approach lines not simply as drawings but as poetic thought harbingers. The line becomes a silent script to read through intuition rather than language.

My asemic drawings extend this exploration by transforming poetic thought into visual form. These drawings consist of flowing lines, symbolic marks, and vaporous structures that resemble fragments of a language that cannot be fully deciphered. The works do not aim to be read in a traditional sense. It is an invitation to the viewer to experience rhythm, motion, and free-flowing thoughts through the visual, moving energies of the lines.

One of my asemic drawings, 'Time's Script', depicts an invented script of memory or time. Two triangular forms bordered by repetitive stepped lines that resemble pathways. These stepped edges suggest fluidity of movement where the passage of time is marked in stages. Within the larger triangular field, there is a sequence of symbols, lines, angles, circles, and clusters of dots which appear to be arranged as writing or a script, yet they belong to no recognizable language. The aim is to interpret them while resisting comparison to known forms.

These marks function as a personal and imagined script. It is an attempt to capture memories, fleeting awareness, and inner reflections that cannot easily be translated into the language of the everyday. The symbols appear suspended inside the structure, almost like traces of whispered time. In the lower triangular form, enclosed shapes move inward toward a small central point akin to a quiet core of awareness and experience.

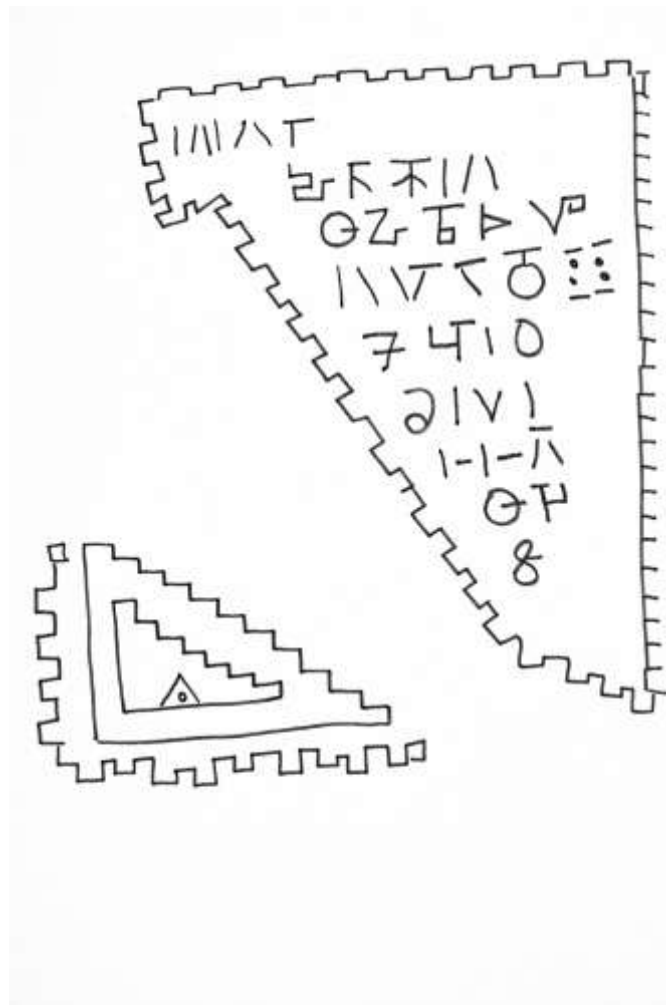


Image 4: Time's Script by Ms. Komal Gupta

As a creative person, for me, the images become an invented language of reflection, where a viewer encounters a silent record of thought unfolding across space. A mystery to unravel! Each observer may imagine different narratives, emotions, or languages within the same composition. The Tao Te Ching, attributed to Laozi, famously states: “The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.” Some truths cannot be fully expressed through language.

In today’s digital landscape, asemic writing has gained new visibility through social media, collaborative publications, and communities across Asia. Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook showcase experimental calligraphy and marks that circulate through reels, artworks, and short videos. ‘An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting’, edited by Michael Jacobson and Tim Gaze, has brought together artists worldwide, including Asian contributors. Istanbul’s Zilberman Gallery in 2024 featured Writing Remains, inspired by Zhang Xu and Huáisù, exploring asemic meaning. As a result, asemic writing has been growing as a collaborative and cross-cultural form of visual poetry in a fractured world.

Conclusion

Asemic writing in Asia has become a dynamic dialogue between ancient traditions and contemporary experimentation. Across the region, writing has long been understood as more than a communicative tool. From the expressive energy of Chinese calligraphy and the meditative discipline of Japanese Zen brushwork to the symbolic scripts of Siddham and tantric diagrams, the written mark is seen as both visual form and spiritual gestures in Asian cultures. Contemporary artists continue to extend this legacy. Figures such as Xu Bing and Wang Dongling challenge the authority of language through invented or distorted scripts, while artists like Nikheel Aphale flip the scripts of Devanagari into fluid, meditative forms that emphasize gestures over readability and invite intuitive analysis. It is a unique personal journey for each artist and reader that defies the limitations of time and space.

Within this evolving landscape, asemic writing is the amalgamation of poetry, art, and philosophy, inviting viewers to experience writing as rhythm, movement, and visual presence rather than scripts to decode. My own explorations through asemic drawings, seek to create an invented script of felt memory or experiences in time. The written marks and lines become both images and poetic traces of thought and feelings. Ultimately, these practices demonstrate that writing can carry meaning beyond language. In the curious spaces between text and

image, asemic writing transforms the elusive and time seared mark itself into a poetic and spiritually aware act.

References

- Barrass, Gordon. *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Gaze, Tim, and Michael Jacobson, eds. *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*. Uitgeverij, 2013.
- Jacobson, Michael. *The New Post-Literate: A Gallery of Asemic Writing*. Minneapolis: Post-Asemic Press, 2013.
- Kraus, Richard Curt. *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Suzuki, D. T. *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- Xu Bing. *Book from the Sky*. Installation, 1987–1991. Wikipedia
- Gu Wenda. *United Nations Project*. Installation series, 1993–present.
- Aphale, Nikheel. Contemporary experimental Devanagari calligraphy and asemic works.
- Laozi. *Tao Te Ching*. Various translated editions.
- Gupta, Komal. “Walking the Lines.” Video presentation, *Poetry Expo (Versopolis / Creative Europe Programme)*. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Bjczhz19gXo>

About the Author

Ms. Komal Gupta is an award-winning poet, writer, and wellbeing advocate, blending art with social impact. Founder of *Papyri Connect*, she champions wellbeing and literature. A G100 Advisory Board Member and Peace Partner with TAPN2U, she uplifts communities through poetry, storytelling, and advocacy, inspiring meaningful connections and creative expression worldwide. She believes in the power of words, arts, and culture to change lives and impact society in positive ways. A social entrepreneur on a mission to empower women in business and artisanal start-ups. She has worked as a Montessori Teacher Trainer and Preschool Principal and is currently on board as National Vice President of WICCI Arts Leadership Council.

