Almost any of the supplies for other forms of painting, and many of those for ceramics or printmaking, are useful for china painting. Most novice china painters have had some experience with at least one other form of art, and will have many of the necessary tools already on hand.

My brother the musician always says there’s nothing to playing the piano; you just hit the right key at the right time. I reply that there’s also nothing to drawing; you just make the right mark in the right place. And very often in art, that “right mark” is best made with a brush. When choosing brushes, remember that the only thing that matters is the finished piece. Your hand and eye determine where the “right place” is, but the brushes make that “right mark,” and thus, are your most important tools.

Artist’s brushes are designated as watercolor or oil painting brushes, softer ones generally being for watercolor and stiffer ones for oil. Watercolor brushes generally work well for china painting, particularly if water is used as the medium. Oil-based china paint is a bit thicker and stickier, so many china painters, including myself, prefer a slightly stiffer brush. Size, shape and hair type are the variables that affect the cost and function of a brush.

**SHAPES**

A brush’s designation is determined by the shape of its ferrule (the metal or plastic piece that holds bristles to handle) and its end profile. Some common round-ferruled shapes are rounds, liners, riggers, scrollers, scripts and stencils.

A good watercolor round is the one indispensable brush. Most china painters prefer them in sizes 4 to 6. The very tiny ones are superfluous if you’ve got a larger one with a very good point.

*Liners* are long and thin, and riggers (so named because they’re good for drawing the rigging of ships) are longer still. They make long, thin, even lines. The point of a liner may be round or it may be angled, in which case it is called a cut liner. A more exaggerated version of this shape may be made with a flat ferrule and be called a sword liner, specifically designed for banding.

*Scrollers* are slightly thicker in the body, but also have a long thin point. They are used when a line with a small amount of variation in width is needed. They are also the
brush of choice for raised paste and enamel work. 

**Scripts** are similar to liners, but with fatter bodies. If only the point is used, they make lines similar to liners, but if you press down slightly, they will produce a wider line. As the name implies, they are used for italic script.

**Stencil** brushes are flat on the ends, and are used to fill stencils with even areas of color. They can also be used to remove brush strokes laid down with another brush, producing a stippled pattern. Water-based china paint blotted with a dry stencil brush will have a finer grain pattern than that made with a wet brush. Very tiny stencil brushes can be hard to find, but you can make your own by clipping the end off an old round. When a stencil brush’s end is cut at an angle, it is referred to as a deerfoot stippler. Some brush suppliers make a variation on the stencil brush shape, with shorter, softer bristles, called a pouncer.

A cat’s tongue brush has a thick body, and a short, sharp point. A flat-ferruled version of this shape is often called a berry brush, and is specifically designed for painting many tiny shapes, such as the individual seeds of blackberries.

**Mops** may be round or flat, but often have no ferrule. They hold large quantities of liquid and dispense it a little at a time. Mops are also used dry to pick up powdered color when laying a dry ground. Most of the above brush shapes are made with either metal or quill ferrules. Many china painters prefer quill brushes to metal ferrules because they are more flexible and “spring” better. Quill brushes also differ from ferruled brushes in that they are not perfectly round, and must be held with the flat side down, or the point will split or “quack” into a shape resembling a duck’s open bill. Many quill brushes are sold without a handle, requiring the artist to move points from one handle to another, which often splits the quill. They should be soaked in warm water to soften them and pushed gently onto the handle. If they do split, you may slip a short piece of heat-shrink tubing over the quill and heat it gently with a match.

**Brights** are the most versatile flat-ferruled brushes. They are slightly longer than they are wide. Flats are similar, but their length and width are the same. Both are used to fill in broad areas and washes of color, and both are made with either square or angled tips. Flats and brights make a broad, straight-sided, square-ended mark when they’re moved up or down, and a thin mark when moved sideways. Moving them in a circular motion produces a C-shaped mark.

**Filberts** have a rounded profile and make an oval mark. Fitches taper to a chisel point and make a teardrop shape, useful for drawing foliage. Fitches and filberts are typically not moved sideways, but only up and down, although the straight side of a fitch can be used like the square end of a flat.

**Fans** also have a flat ferrule, but the bristles are splayed into a wide rounded end. They are useful for making streaky marks, and are often used dry to blend areas of different colors while the paint is still wet. Clipping some of the bristles can result in very interesting marks.

**Flats and rounds** are the most versatile shapes. A selection of these and a good liner or rigger will cover most painting situations. Many china painters use no more than a small round, a liner, and a large and small shader, either square or angled. In traditional china painting the “American style,” featuring soft naturalistic effects, is usually painted using square shaders, while the more rigid and brighter “Dresden style” employs more rounds and liners.

**Whirleys** (or spooleys) and **spatter** brushes are unlike the above shapes, and are made up of stiff bristles protruding from a central shaft. A whirley’s bristles are very stiff and short, and are designed to be dragged through a wet stroke to simulate hair. Spatter brushes have longer bristles, as well as a piece of wire or wood along one side. When the brush is rotated against the wire, droplets of paint are flung onto the work.
BRISTLES
The best watercolor brushes are Kolinsky sable, renowned for strength, springiness and fine point. Next best are red sable, not as springy as Kolinsky, but about half the price. Sableine is a fine ox hair dyed to resemble sable, and is cheaper but not as good. The cheapest watercolor brushes are squirrel, sheep, or goat hair. Squirrel hair is very fine and limp.

The best oil painting brushes are hog bristle and very stiff. Hog bristle brushes are generally too stiff for most china painters’ taste. A softer oil brush might be mongoose, and an ox hair brush will be softer yet. “Camel hair” is a trade name applied to any number of hairs, none of which come from camels.

The wide variety of synthetic bristles has an enormous range of stiffness, price and holding capacity. It is often difficult to compare brands of brushes, because so many different bristles are simply labeled “synthetic.” Nylon bristles, which do not taper, are very resilient and easy to clean.

PRICE
This is a tricky issue for ceramicists because biqueware and raw glaze abrade brushes quickly. A fine brush that would last a watercolorist a lifetime may lose its point in a year or two of oxide decoration. China painting is not nearly as hard on brushes, as the smooth glazed surface is not as abrasive. For banding or laying on flat areas of glaze, an expensive brush may be wasted. Sometimes though, only a very good brush will make the mark you need, consistently and repeatedly. With brushes, price is a very good indication of quality, so remember that your brushes are your most important tools. It’s often tempting to save a little money by getting the next-best bristles, or a slightly smaller size, but all that matters in making art is what it looks like. Skimping is foolish if the art doesn’t look right.

CARE
Never dip a dry brush into colors, either water- or oil-based. The brush will not load completely if the bristles are not wetted first. Dip the brush into water or other medium and dry it slightly on a rag. Brushes should be rinsed after use as dried china paint will abrade the bristles. Soap or solvent is not necessary with water-based china paints, but might be with gum-filled commercial products. Oil-based mediums should be rinsed out in clean turpentine or paint thinner. Some china painters also rinse their brushes in alcohol at the end of each session. Avoid strong solvents such as lacquer thinner, shellac remover, or acetone, as they will
weaken the glue which holds the hairs in place. If you work with both oil and water mediums, use a separate set of brushes for each.

Never rest a brush on its bristles. A brush left to dry that way becomes useless. Brushes which have the bristles glued into the handle, like sumi brushes, should not be left to dry with the tips up. Sumi brushes often have a silk loop on the end of the handle, used to hang the brush point down. Don’t let your brushes dry on a heating element or in a blast of hot air. This will dry out the natural oils and make the brush less flexible.

Use a palette knife to mix colors, not a brush. I must admit I am consistently guilty of this sin, and my brushes pay the price for it.

If you transport your brushes, protect the tips. You can buy a specially made brush case, but a length of plastic pipe or even a cardboard box will work as well. I roll mine in a woven bamboo place mat, which allows them to dry, as well as protects them. Specially made brush boxes are available, with springs fixed inside, to hold brushes in place.

**TESTING BRUSHES**

Evaluating brushes is very difficult, but some art supply stores will provide plain water and paper. New brushes often have a protective plastic sleeve over the bristles. If you remove this, be very careful if you put it back on, as it’s easy to bend a few hairs back and damage them. Sharptipped brushes usually have a stiff sizing in them to protect the point. Soak this out in water before testing them.

Drop a dry, unsized brush on its tip to assess springiness. Wet it and see if it comes to a point naturally. Make strokes up, down and in a circle, to see the differences in the mark. Push the brush straight down to see what mark that makes. Vary the pressure from light to hard to light again, to see if the point returns. Keep doing this until the brush is dry to test its capacity.

**BRUSH STROKES**

A brush’s size, shape and type of bristle all contribute to the mark it will produce, but the art is in the stroke. While there are an infinite variety of combinations and permutations, all brush marks are the result of a few basic motions. Try all these motions with every one of your brushes. Try them with the brush well loaded, and almost empty. Use a very fluid medium and a sticky one, on both vertical and horizontal surfaces. Notice how a soft or a stiff brush, or a short or long handle, feels.

Just lightly touch the surface, and continue to press until the ferrule touches the work.

The easiest stroke might be called a “pecking” stroke. Just touch a loaded brush tip straight down on the surface. A flat brush produces a line; a round one, a dot. Notice how clean or frayed the mark is. Continue this until the brush is empty, noting how well the tip springs back, how the color flows, and how much the brush will hold.

Make a “comma” stroke by moving this dot stroke to the side. Push down, ease up, move the tip and lift up. A good brush will make a clean mark throughout the stroke, with no stray hairs dragging alongside.

A “C” or “S” stroke is made by moving the brush tip sideways and in a half-circle. A flat-ferruled brush will leave a thick or thin trail according to the angle it’s traveling. Notice how thin a line you can make when traveling sideways. Test your control of pressure by making this stroke with a round or a liner. If you can maintain an even pressure when changing directions, you will leave a line of even width.

You should also be able to make a line of even width with a flat or bright, using a straight stroke. This is the stroke you will use most often, to fill in areas of color. It’s most often made by pulling the brush toward yourself, but practice making it in all directions.

Try using more than one color on your brush. To load a round brush with two colors, fill it normally, blot off the tip, and load the tip with a contrasting color. Using a flat brush, load each side with a different color. For an even gradation, mix the two colors next to each other on a palette, and drag the brush back and forth between them until they blend. Now practice all the above strokes.

An interesting practice exercise is to load two colors on a flat or bright, and make a straight stroke in which you vary the pressure on one edge, but not the other. This produces a mark that is straight on one side and wavy on the other. Interesting leaves and vegetation can be depicted this way. Flip the brush over and draw the other side of the leaf, to shade on the opposite side.

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