CHAPTER ONE

Reading and Misreading

Double Entendre in Locally Oriented Logos

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Is contemporary Chinese art part of contemporary Chinese culture or part of a Western-centered global culture in this era of globalization?[1] In the past two decades, prestigious museums and galleries such as the Whitney Biennial, the Venice Biennale, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Pompidou Center in Paris, and the Guggenheim Museum have featured works by Chinese artists. Scholars and artists alike from both China and the West (Euro-America) celebrate an ever-booming art industry that now has added a new member to the club. Some Chinese believe that the display of works of artists from China in these exhibitions symbolizes China's entrance into the world arena of contemporary art—"China going to the world."[2] This celebration of "world-going" assumes that "'the emerging global culture transcends national boundaries'; or, as prominent writers in the West such as Huntington bluntly state, if a culture can help improve the economic development and living standards of other nations, that culture should be shared by all human societies and be called 'a shared culture of the human race.'"[3] While certain Chinese hold this naïve, apolitical view, the West celebrates the inclusion of art with a strong Chinese appearance as the greatly expanded "global [context] of our time."[4] From a more colonial perspective, this situation proves that Chinese artists work for "the nations of others,"[5] a version of self-colonization.

In this chapter, I attempt to offer a different reading of the situation through a reexamination of the process of China's initial efforts of "world-going" as a means of renewing its culture. In particular, I want to discuss how Chinese artists have applied and still apply their managed selection of Western discourse, rhetoric, and semantic elements in art making (and presenting) as a means of protesting the political control of art in their still officially socialist homeland. As they encounter and participate in the culture of global capitalism they are playing an important role in the ongoing cultural decentralizing or deterritorializing process of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This decentralization of culture has diversified and diluted the relationship between geographical place and cultural experience, allowing the realization of interculturality with strong Chinese cultural presence in the international art scene; and, further, advocates art "work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other."[6] The process of recontextualizing a local cultural iconography in a diversified global environment is more dependent than ever on the network of relationships that closely influence the artists' daily life experiences.

This process of interculturality is particularly evident when the works of Chinese artists interact with the changing cultural background of their audience. The past two to three decades of China's foray into contemporary art can be seen as comprising two distinct periods based on the different audiences expected for their works: before 1989 the dialogue was mostly an internal attempt at negotiation within a China-defined geo-cultural space. After 1989, cutting-edge artists from China crossed geo-cultural boundaries and faced mainly audiences whose cultural experiences are non-Chinese. Their works, based on both Chinese and Western contemporary art discourse, share both Chinese and Western visual elements that are neither Chinese nor Western, because they result from the artists' borrowing of different cultural presentations, displays, and cultural symbols. For example, Cai Guoqiang's (蔡国强) trademark traditional brush and ink calligraphy is replaced by traces of burnt gunpowder on paper; rubbings of the flat surfaces of architectural structures are reassembled into installations in Xu Bing's (徐冰) *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (鬼打墙); Chinese characters transformed into unreadable logos are now considered postmodern art as in Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* (天书, Figure I.1). In addition to all this, scientific and information technologies have been brought into the traditional realm of Chinese art, transforming them from a local cultural practice to newer forms of art. Xu Bing's *What's Your Name* changes Chinese script into pictorial elements

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to rearrange syllabic units in phonetic languages, or the Romanization of nonphonetic languages. For the first time, with the help of a computer, Chinese calligraphy-like words can be written and read in all languages.

Since the 1990s, contemporary Chinese art, which is very innovative both visually and culturally, has been functioning outside China's home cultural discourse and markets. Chinese artists often live and work outside China, outside Chinese cultural expectations, and in the nations of others. Thus their art has come to be considered part of the postmodern Western cultural environment, where Chinese artists are allowed to participate in global Western culture; yet the price Chinese artists must pay is a compromised cultural position. In their own country, outside of a small circle of artists, these worldly, famous artists are almost unknown. Although the Chinese government has somewhat loosened its control over what artists may produce, it has successfully confined this new art within a very small, closely defined area. However, at least some contemporary Chinese artists, in one way or another, manage to participate in the postindustrial, capitalist institutions of art—museums, the market, academia, and the media—outside China. Still, they do not function as the traditionally defined, ethnic "Others" within the Anglo-American worlds that use their works to address the political struggle of these "ethnic Others." Works by Ken Lum or Gu Xiong, for example, more typically address issues that Asian Americans and Asian Canadians are concerned with, not Chinese issues.

I will draw on a series of works to argue that Chinese contemporary art began with the zealous subverting of socialist cultural control, and that this subversion, encouraged by the Western world throughout the 1980s, ended with the students' movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Shocked by the slaughter of student protesters calling for freedom and an end to government corruption, and by the government's suppression and persecution of the movement, in the early 1990s Western art critics welcomed Chinese avant-garde artists as an embodiment of the hope that might bring change to China.[7]

The first point to be made is that there are two distinct periods in the contemporary Chinese art movement, the first distinguished by the artists' use of Western artistic discourse, and the second by the intended audience—those for whom the art was made. These two periods are fundamentally different. In the first period, China was far from being part of the world art market as Chinese contemporary art interested few people in the West. To put it simply, the artists then were using the language of Western modern art to reach an internal audience, hoping to change not just the art created in China, but also the polity and society—their use of the localized Western language was aimed at an internal audience in hopes of changing the art world *in* China. However, after Tiananmen Square, China was in the international spotlight and its artists, especially after the banning of contemporary art in China (no exhibitions of such art were allowed for more than a year, between 1989 and 1991) aroused a new level of interest in Chinese contemporary art where some Westerners believed that the new art might stimulate major social and political change to China.

The second period starts in the aftermath of the 1989 student movement with the government's ban of the few leading newspapers and journals devoted to debating contemporary issues, and a great wave of emigration to the United States. Many artists began a life of cultural exile, trying to make their way in the Western countries that had helped them to escape the political pressures of post-1989 China. Their works entered Western mainstream galleries and museums as never before; they also began to address international issues, or issues that were relevant in the culture they now inhabited. This participation in the Western art world and use of the Western discourse on culture and politics allowed them entrée into the Western cultural arena. This discourse was the same discourse that had long imposed a rigid European rule that inflicted cultural oppression on others: Europe's cultural authority betrayed through its rejection of other "languages." The use of non-European languages in such a situation provides previously colonized subjects an unprecedented opportunity to resist the oppression and, via their native language, to overcome the imposed cultural context. Thus, Chinese artists now participate in the international art market while at the same time advancing cultural pluralism in the West. These artists bring with them the visual linguistic references of the Chinese native. Through their use of such visual references, Chinese artists such as Xu Bing have created a distinct, if "liminal," position from which a third cultural space can be established. My theoretical assumption is that the international art world, with the participation of speakers of many languages, consists of a network of "texts" to which all readers have equal access, choosing the linguistic path speaking through art that is most familiar to them. As J. D. Botler suggests, "in that simple fact (or theoretical assumption) the reader's relationship to the text changes radically. A text, as a network, has no univocal sense; it is a multiplicity without the imposition of a principle of domination."[8] Instead of considering the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and the globalization of art production and consumption as "discursive division between the first and third world," I suggest that the use of Chinese visual references—the logos—in Chinese art in recent decades has dramatically changed Chinese self-esteem, and ended the heretofore reinforced dominant position of Anglo-American cultural discourse; or at least undermined it, without intentionally doing so.[9]

The cultural tension between Chinese artists and the West began as a challenge-and-response reaction when China confronted the Europeans in the nineteenth century and suffered defeat in the Opium War. China's artists learned that the best solution to the problem of empowering China in relation to the West was one that had a long history in China even before it first confronted the West.[10] The problem of empowering China in relationship to others was older and more serious than its confrontation with Western armed might. Chinese critical discourse is focused primarily on applying general "formulations derived from the Western mode of theorizing to the resolution of practical issues in China."[11] Using the Western model of theorizing social and artistic issues to subvert the West's own imperious discourse gained intellectuals great success. One example was the rise of oil painting to a cultural position as important as that of traditional Chinese painting, if not of greater importance. However, during this period of learning from the West, the Chinese notion of the *ti/yong* dichotomy (*ti*, 体, the essence of a thing; *yong*, 用, its application)—which held that the two were aspects of a single phenomenon, just as Aristotle had held that substance and appearance were indivisible—in fact became separated. Chinese learning (that is, Confucian learning) could remain the *ti*, while Western learning would be the *yong* or application.

In the nearly thirty years since 1976, when the Cultural Revolution ended, art in China has gone through several stages in its pursuit of modernity and postmodernity. This period saw movement from subversion of socialist cultural and political control in the late 1970s, to participation in the New Wave and "cultural fever" movements in the 1980s, to the politically cynical and politically charged popular art and final joining of the international art activities of the late 1990s and end of the century. In the 1990s, the cultural relationship between China and the West gradually changed from one of a Chinese mimicking of Western visual language to one of constructing a cultural hybrid that can finally play a major role in the international art world. Just as economic success in recent decades has allowed China to proclaim a Chinese-style road to modernization, so too was successful art recognized as a means of building an image of China as a modern country. The art produced inside China is a hybrid that combines contemporary art approaches only at the level of presentation, and not at the level of problematizing social or cultural issues.

THE STARS GROUP (1979)

I characterize the Stars Group's mission as the subversion of socialism through the use of a localized Western vocabulary, rather than a mere mimicking of Western artistic language. Many Chinese critics and viewers have criticized the Stars Group as lacking in originality and only closely imitating early Western modernism.[12] Even worse, few realized that for these artists, the mimicking of early twentieth-century Western modern art styles, borrowed from Western liberalism but packaged as art, was a powerful weapon to critique and even subvert the socialist cultural policies of the late 1970s.[13] It is no secret that the Stars Group wrapped their political discontent in the cloak of Western modern art, but should they be associated with the society where they lived or the society they imitated?[14] The Stars Group was not a cultural negotiation between two cultures, but one that used Western modernism—the early modern art style—to oppose Socialist Realism, the officially sanctioned Chinese art of the time. When we situate our investigation within the context of the latter seventies, we realize that the Stars's pursuit of freedom was a response to the government's new policy. In 1977, just after Mao's death, the fall of the Gang of Four, and the return of Deng Xiaoping to power, China's newspapers began to proclaim the need for democracy. The *People's Daily*, reborn with a completely new voice, declared that if China's socialist bureaucracy remained unchecked by elections and other democratic institutions, it might again run amok and degenerate into "feudal fascism." That June, unbelievably, the government instigated a campaign that asserted that China's socialist state would no longer function for China if it were no more than merely "copying straight from Marx, Lenin, and Chairman Mao."[15]

By February 1978, a new constitution had been adopted; Article 45 guaranteed "freedom of speech, correspondence, the press, demonstrations, and the freedom to strike."[16] In response to the government's call to reform China, people began to take advantage of this relaxation of political controls and in concert with the late 1970s democracy movement, such as the famous Democracy Wall at Xidan, a group of artists made their historic move. On October 1, 1979, a chilly and gloomy day, a group of young people in Beijing went into the streets with banners in their hands and signs on their shoulders to demonstrate for freedom of art. For the first time, the culturally and politically oppressed people wanted their voice to be part of the cultural discourse of late twentieth-century China.[17] Articulating their demands in an art style that imitated the early modern art of the West, but in a substantially localized version, these artists criticized "crawling behind Abstract Art; it is simply raping the art." This was a period when most Chinese equated abstract art with the avant-garde, and believed abstract art to be radical and virtually undecipherable. Meanwhile, the majority of those who viewed the Stars's exhibition supported the use of early modern art as a way to launch the attack on the socialist control of cultural production.[18]

The sparks set off by this group of artists blazed throughout China; their unyielding cultural confrontation with the "oppressors" inspired and changed the cultural landscape of the country. At the same time, their use of the vocabulary of modern art and their use of such slogans as "Seeking Freedom of Expression" touched the hearts of some Westerners, and these people helped the artists' message to reach the West.[19] The late 1970s pursuit of freedom prepared thousands of Chinese artists to embrace different cultural discourses—in particular, that of the West—as a means of gradually subverting the socialist system. This movement occurred at a time when China had just escaped the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution: a time when the West did not expect to see the advent of avant-garde art in China; and a time when neither Chinese audiences nor artists were confident about just how far to test the government's tolerance. As a result, artists' use of Western visual language triggered debates over whether art in China should be more Westernized or return to a more traditional mode.

The Westerners in Beijing who observed the Stars's movement believed that in mimicking the West, the Stars were using the Western social model to change China, but did not remember that in the West avant-garde art had failed miserably at stimulating social transformation.[20] In fact, the term "avant-garde" had become something of a comical concept in the West, leaving the Chinese contemporary art movement as the last real avant-garde. From the point of view of the Chinese people at the time, such art was not for "camouflage,"[21] or to blend into Western society, or a mode of disguise used by both predators and prey for survival in a shared environment. On the contrary, the Stars's imitation of the West within the cultural context of the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution was an act of *anti*-mimicry that allowed the artists to distance themselves and subvert the politically controlled cultural environment of the late 1970s. The Stars's mimicry of a modern art style that stood for freedom and modernity, for liberty and democracy within the context of Maoist socialism, was intended to serve as a protest and demonstration of their own cultural and ideological orientation. Most Stars members had suffered during the Cultural Revolution; their works acted against the cultural and ideological control of the period. Their art, Western in appearance, was a Chinese response to the historical circumstance of Maoist and immediate post-Mao China.

The Cultural Revolution and its dramatic demise threw China into a cultural limbo; it ended so abruptly that there was no transition period. The rethinking of the horrific years that had consumed thousands, or even millions, of people's lives was quickly and strictly prohibited in response to the rise of the Stars movement that used literature, art, film, and other media to condemn the Cultural Revolution that had wounded people in the most brutal way.

Socialist Realist art and its extreme version, the politically controlled art expressions that developed during the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s, was the main visual environment and pool of cultural resources for artists who played important roles in the avant-garde movement during the 1980s. Although these artists were young during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), some were already enlisted in the nationwide propaganda effort of writing and illustrating posters. At the end of the 1970s, when the grandiose revolutionary stage collapsed, to people's surprise, oil painting, calligraphy, and traditional ink painting, instead of being mere distant echoes, were energized in new ways and elevated to a much higher level. With skills well honed in depicting exaggerated revolutionary images, these artists had at least two options when the Cultural Revolution ended: follow current trends, i.e., pursue a milder version of the Cultural Revolution art style, or convert to something new and fresh. The avant-garde artist chose to transcend the tradition of pursuing a social mission that developed when early modern Western art was introduced to China.

This was a period of restoring and revising the disrupted mission of modernization of the early twentieth century. It recalled the dim memory of the art movement that occurred in China in the early twentieth century—a movement that involved such artists as Liu Haisu (刘海粟, 1895–1992) who declared his belief in the social mission of art in *The Trader of Art*, published in 1925: that artists should be heroic builders of history.[22] Other organizations, such as the Storm Society (决澜社), established in 1932, were brought back to jog the collective memory. The manifesto of the Storm Society was powerful: "In China, twentieth-century art should take on a new complexion: Let's rise, with our storm-like passion, iron-willed to build a world of line, color and form."[23] And it was the Stars Group who rediscovered the language and political power within the modern art movement, revitalizing the power of art in the context of loosened cultural control and the excitement of tasting "new" art forms and styles, as well as the social freedom that allowed society to tolerate what they were doing. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Chinese avant-garde art, as embodied by the Stars, began with those who rebelled, in one way or another, against the cultural forms that had been established under the communist regime and further developed during the Cultural Revolution. Chinese artists either adopted a Western vocabulary and struggled for an exit from cultural limbo, or returned to their traditional roots. Divisive as it might be, the Cultural Revolution had become the central focus of people's memories and inspirations. For the next decade, artists either fought to get out of the Cultural Revolution's shadow, or critiqued it by using the language of Western art. Borrowing the language and ideas of the West was nothing new to the Post-Cultural Revolution era; it was a practice begun in the nineteenth century that continued throughout the twentieth century as a means to empower China: using Western ideas, technology, and even borrowed discourses to change China.[24] According to János Mátyás Kovács, "External cultures have frequently been lured into the . . . Communist countries by unsatisfied demand, not forced on the 'innocent natives' as the smart colonization thesis would assert. . . . Why mistake invitation for capitulation?"[25] The two different readings of the artists' use of Western visual references have existed ever since the Stars movement, despite the fact that the Stars had no intention of being co-opted by the Western market at the time.

"NEITHER-NOR": SCRIPTS AS LOGO

The period 1979–1985 was one in which China's New Wave artists detached themselves from Chinese socialist cultural ideology, even though the pre-1985 art movement was in many ways still influenced by the Grand Socialist Narrative. Such developments as the Present Generation Painting Exhibition (同代人油画展), first held in Beijing in 1980, was influential for displaying works that had broken free of the official art molds and for being organized by and featuring a group of young artists who were well trained in prestigious art academies. Some works in this exhibition particularly expressed the artists' deep concern for their detachment from Chinese tradition and their hope that true talents might be recognized and utilized in the society. Differing from the Stars artists who came mainly from outside the mainstream Chinese art world, artists of the Present Generation were already well-known painters of government-run art academies and artists' associations such as the Beijing Art Academy (北京画院), the Yunnan Provincial Artists' Association (云南美协), or the Central Academy of Fine Arts. This exhibition set the precedent for the next generation of young artists with academic backgrounds—children of the establishment who rejected the legacy that produced them. Like the Stars but differing from the Present Generation artists, this next generation, who played major roles in the New Wave of 1985, was not sympathetic to Chinese cultural tradition. Most of them even refused to identify themselves with that tradition. Works of art of the culturally bustling 1980s imitated the Western visual language not only as a way to negotiate with the government, but also in order to fundamentally question the validity of Chinese culture and call for real change. The New Wave emerged when "a strong pro-West trend clearly took shape during the 1980s, culminating in the six-part TV documentary *River Elegy*, which was aired in 1988–1989."[26] Living amid this pro-West trend, China's artists strove to negotiate a series of artistic breakthroughs and to take their place in the new post-Mao cultural environment—a freer time in the pursuit for modernity. Discontented with the social reality and frustrated with the slow pace of social change, artists of the 1980s, such as Huang Yongping's "Xiamen Dada" Group (厦门达达), imitated or appropriated conceptual art, as did Zhang

Peili (张培力) with his series of paintings and installations of rubber gloves. The coherent, yet vacant, social ideology established over the decades after 1949 was diluted by the colorful, kaleidoscope-like cultural changes of the 1980s. These changes split China's art into two major camps: officially sponsored and nonofficial art, including art sponsored by people from other countries but produced mainly in China. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, whether voluntarily like the Stars Group or due to economic and artistic needs, many artists chose to live at the margins of society, becoming cultural exiles within their own country.

While some artists chose to detach themselves from the Chinese traditional culture (as had the Stars and many other artists of the 85 New Wave), beginning in the mid-1980s artists like Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan (吳山專), and Gu Wenda (谷文达) distanced themselves from this trend of Chinese cultural detachment. Here I must point out that the term "Chinese tradition" was, at the time, used as a euphemism for Chinese revolutionary or socialist tradition. Artists like Gu Wenda, who was very well trained in Chinese classical culture, calligraphy, and painting, can serve to help us to understand what was meant by "detaching from tradition." That distancing neither subverted nor challenged the Marxist ideology that legitimized the Chinese Communist Party's rule over China. For the artists of the 1980s, as for many intellectuals, "the best strategy . . . [was] not [to] openly challenge the party-state but [to] achieve more intellectual space and freedom. This means importing Western theories and research paradigms and using them to critique the contemporary society and culture."[27] Two works by these artists can serve to clearly illustrate from which tradition they wanted to detach themselves: Gu Wenda's *Do We Have to Examine the Word Jing Written by Three Men and Two Women?* (Figure 1.1) and Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong—Red Grids Number 1* (Figure 1.2). These works draw visual references directly from, and subvert notions promoted in, the Cultural Revolution—that is, the tradition of Revolutionary culture.

Along with many of his generation, Xu Bing had no systematic school education, even though books and words attracted him more than anything else. Indeed, most of his childhood was spent in the midst of battles of words—the "big character" posters or *dazibao* (大字报, Figure 1.3) of the Cultural Revolution.

Even though quantities of books were destroyed or put into storage, some people still had limited access to books, although most people were not so lucky. According to Xu Bing:

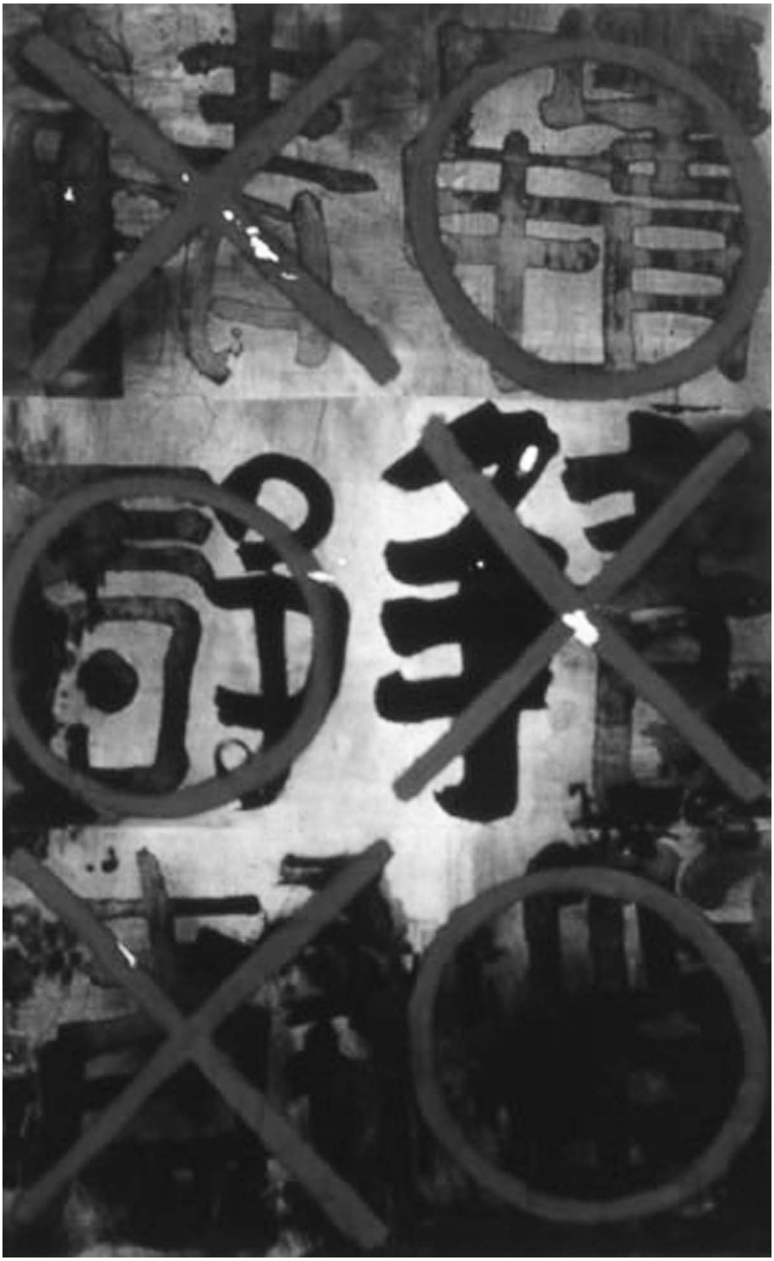

FIGURE 1.1. *Do We Have to Examine the Word Jing Written by Three Men and Two Women?* Gu Wenda, ink on paper, 1985. (Courtesy of the artist, photo: Tsao Hsingyuan.)

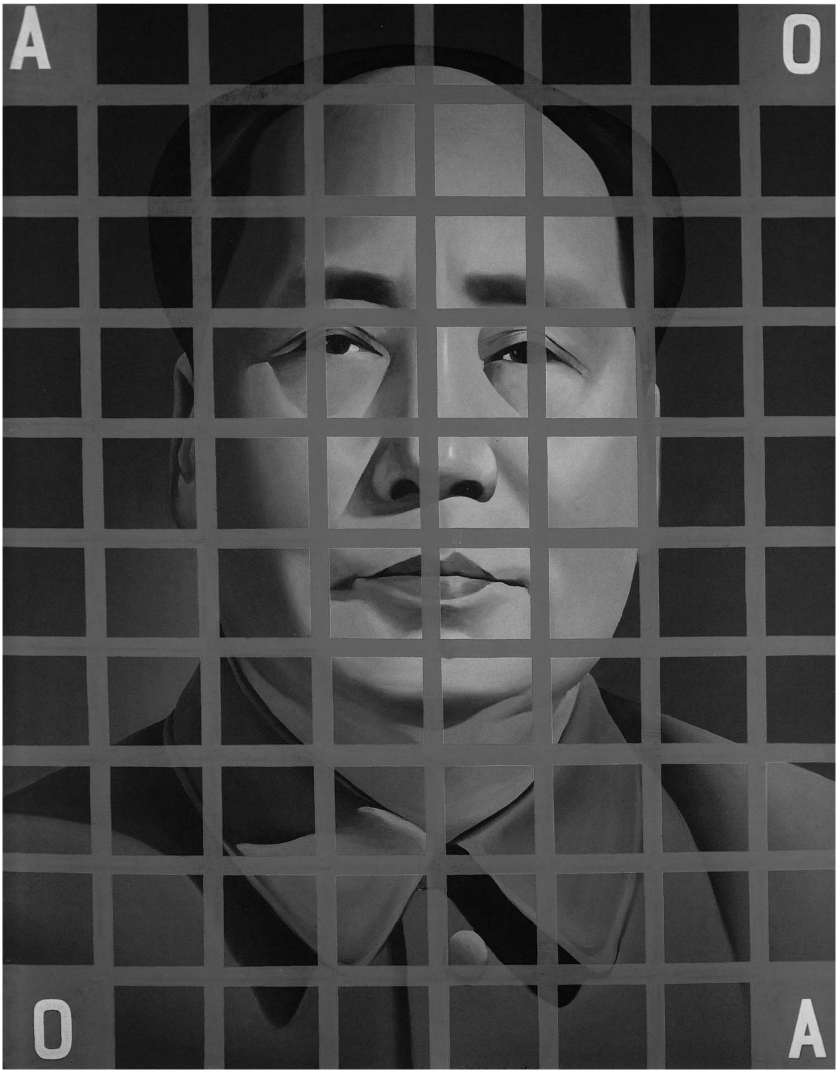

FIGURE 1.2. *Mao Zedong—Red Grids Number 1*, Wang Guangyi, oil on canvas, 1986. (Courtesy of the artist.)

My parents worked in a university campus—my father was in the department of history and my mother worked in the department of library sciences—and I became familiar with all sorts of books at a very early age. But books seemed strange to me then because I couldn't read them—I was too young. And when I finally could

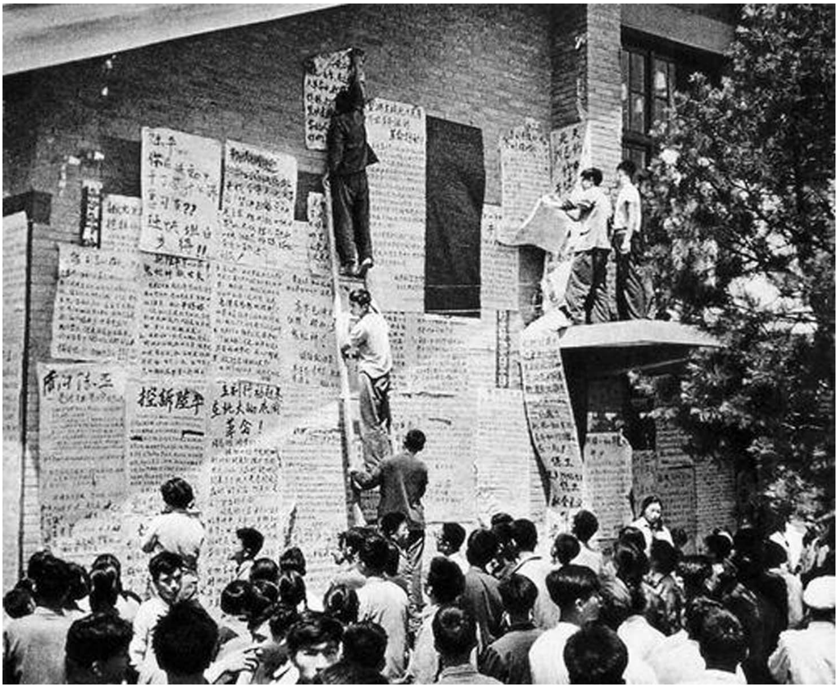

FIGURE 1.3. Big character posters (*dazibao* 大字报), photo from the Cultural Revolution, 1967.

> read them, I was not allowed to read them. These were the years when we could no longer read whatever we chose to. We read *Mao's Little Red Book*.[28]

To make the situation worse, Xu Bing finished nine years of schooling without really learning anything. He was sent to the countryside to be "reeducated" by the peasants, because he was then considered, by Cultural Revolution standards, a young intellectual who had lost contact with the reality of society.

This was not simply a period of detachment, and it was not the artists' choice to truly pull themselves away from China's cultural tradition. Even as they used Western vocabulary to destabilize current cultural policies, artists such as Gu Wenda and Xu Bing continued sifting through Chinese history and literature in order to find their own cultural roots. The attempt to find those traditional roots might not even have begun without their traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution, as Xu Bing has often remarked.[29] Growing up during those years of turmoil, this generation may have lacked a stable school environment, but there was never a lack of words "in your face" when the entire nation was papered with both big and small character posters dissecting various social and cultural issues. For many people who experienced the Cultural Revolution far away from books and culture in the countryside, life during this period is almost beyond imagining: books and words seemed powerful and yet remote to Xu Bing and many others of his generation. Streets, walls—virtually every flat surface—were covered with *dazibao* and slogan posters with even bigger characters, the *dabiaoyu* (大标语). The messages conveyed via these displayed words were often contradictory: the same people could be the worst of enemies one day, the best of comrades the next, although the progression was more often the reverse. Too many extravagant words were used, too many grand ideas delivered; in the end, their sheer weight numbed the readers and anesthetized the nation. In the late 1960s the notion spread that China should be turned into a "great red ocean of slogans" (红海洋). When submerged deeply in a red sea of words, however, there was little anybody cared to read. It was at this time that hand-copied novels became popular and many people were jailed for disseminating thrillers or romance books such as *Meihua Dang* (The Black Club Party) or *Shaonü zhi Xin* (Young Girls' Hearts). The strict prohibition against these books alienated yet another group of people. Wu Shanzhuan, who grew up in the successive battles of words but without any books to read, best expresses the disjuncture, displacement, absurdity, and visual bombardment of the poster words in his work *Red Humor.*

USING TRADITION TO SUBVERT THE TRADITION

The years 1985 and 1986 must be considered a time of "cultural insurgency." As early as 1983, Gu Wenda painted a long horizontal hand scroll, seven meters wide and nearly one and a half meters high, entitled *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate.* The entire far right end of the painting is devoted to hexagrams written on three square pillars that are almost the height of the work itself, while the rest of the painting is submerged in a group of absurd, unreadable images. The painting apparently draws on Western surrealism but also evokes attempts by Chinese traditional culture to come to terms with the mysterious and irrational. In 1985, Gu Wenda, one of the first academic avant-garde artists to surface, enraged many conservative art critics who considered his works illogical and chaotic. As one critic wrote, "Entering the display hall, what I saw was chaotic ink splashes, characters written backwards, cursive and blocky printing styles intermixed and displaced, all conveying a 'spirit,' 'time,' and 'space' that are far from [our] reality and perversely mimicking 'religion' to lure the viewers into a haze. Some people describe [this work] as 'the funeral of a homo neuroticus!' At the very least, there is some distance between our experience in exhibitions and this viewing."[30]

Influenced, in terms of visual and behavioral experience, by the Cultural Revolution, Gu Wenda used various styles to disassemble, reassemble, displace, and reverse characters as a way of questioning the meaning of words written in different contexts. Borrowing directly from the Cultural Revolution, he used red ink relentlessly to cross out many of the characters. Crossing out a person's name with red ink has been conventionally used in China to indicate that the person in question has been condemned to death. During the Cultural Revolution, this name crossing was more commonly used to discredit people condemned as enemies of the society or of a particular political movement. Gu Wenda's crossing out of certain characters was also intended to apply to the Cultural Revolution itself, negating the common practices of the time—an act of a "double-crossing," or double negation. His thorough training in calligraphy and Chinese philosophy gave him the skills to mimic, mock, and challenge the significance of words when they were used to excess in many contradictory situations. Disjuncture, gaps, and chaos destabilized the conventional ways of understanding written language as a vehicle to convey meaning through words—to decipher meaning based on words.

RED HUMOR: MEMORY OF THE RED HORROR

Wu Shanzhuan, who was born in 1960, is another Hangzhou artist who was too young to participate in or really understand the Cultural Revolution, yet remembers the "red ocean" of propaganda symbols. Wu's most famous work, *Red Humor* (1985), causes every Chinese viewer to tremble, no matter what part the Cultural Revolution played in his or her experience. Wu uses nothing but red, white, and black to write unrelated, disordered, and sometimes absurd messages in large and small characters. He confesses that the reason

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for using the great quantity of red stems from his memory: "an artist cannot escape from his memory and [survive] as a human." According to Wu's memory, the Cultural Revolution consumed more red pigment than the rest of Chinese history combined.[31]

Wu was one of the first artists to attempt to use disassembled and reassembled characters; his abuse of characters derives from his vivid memories of the "red ocean" during his childhood. His understanding of the relationship between word and meaning is conveyed in his famous discourse on Chinese art and culture:

> [W]e believe that our works aroused some humorous feelings among the viewers. The key [to understanding this] is that we use Chinese characters as pure aesthetic elements to be finished on canvas, but the viewers realize that [these constructions] express a conceptual language. The humor rests in the fact that the 'characters' are at the same time considered as pure aesthetic elements; they are meaningful although they do not convey the concepts that Chinese written language would normally [convey].[32]

Wu Shanzhuan's questioning of the relationship between meaning and words has its roots in the ancient text *Book of Changes*: "Writing cannot exhaust words, and words cannot exhaust meanings (书不尽言, 言不尽意)."[33] However, meaning is the goal when utilizing words; once meaning is achieved, one need take no notice of the words (得意忘言). This is like a fisherman ignoring his weir once the fish are caught (得魚而忘荃); or a hunter ignoring his horse once the rabbit has been caught (得兔而忘蹄).[34] This idea was further developed in the practice of metaphilosophy that flourished during the fourth century. The philosopher Wang Bi (226–249) carried the debate of the relationship between words and meaning further: "There is nothing better at conveying meaning than an image, and nothing better at conveying an image than words (尽意莫若象,尽象莫若言)."[35]

For conceptual art, what matters is not the subject matter or content, not style or format, not even the media and technique of presentation; rather, it is the articulation of an individual artist's cultural experiences and ideas. "Meaning comes before the brush strokes" is a common aesthetic belief among Chinese artists. The famous socialist art critic Wang Zhaowen (王朝闻) reiterates this idea in his book *One Counts as Ten* (一 以当十), emphasizing the relationship between image and meaning.[36] In many ways, the meaning, *yi*, is actually the reader's interpretation of the words, the viewer's interpretation of the image, or the significance beyond the words. In the context of Chinese culture, the concept of meaning beyond words and image is a discourse of interpretation, which seeks to link a message or thought that is communicated through text with the intention with which the message is conveyed. Thus both the conveying and the interpretation of meaning are the end, while the words or physical representations—including format, style, and image—are the means.

MIRRORS TO EXAMINE THE WORLD

The most successful work describing the confused status of words in this generation is Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky.* In this piece, Xu Bing took on the highly didactic mission of turning the Chinese writing system—the most familiar visual material for any Chinese person—into a collection of alien-looking artifacts, in an attempt to interrogate the very means of communication. As a well-trained woodblock printmaker, Xu Bing devoted himself to making and carving words that no one understands, and may consider himself as reenacting the invention of Chinese characters by the legendary Cang Jie. Such reenactments were characteristic of mainstream traditional Chinese culture but had become obsolete by the time Xu Bing was working. For *A Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing invented over four thousand characters in the twelfth-century style that coincided with the beginning of printing, another Chinese invention. None of the characters is readable or decipherable. Confronting this work, viewers who read Chinese characters experience a sort of double vision: the past and the present. The past is used to reference the present, while the present is based on subverting both past and present. It is this duality that gives the work its power. The original title was *Xishi jian* (析世鉴), *Mirror for Examining the World*, which mimics the title of a book of history by Sima Guang (司马光, a renowned Northern Song scholar-official), *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governing* (资治通鉴), compiled between 1065 and 1084. The work also recalls three collections of short stories compiled by Feng Menglong (冯梦龙 1574–1646): *Yushi Mingyan* (illustrious words to instruct the world), *Jingshi Tongyan* (comprehensive words to admonish the world), and *Xingshi Hengyan* (lasting words to awaken the world). Mostly cast as love stories, Feng's three books aimed to enlighten the world through the wisdom of the stories.

For his part, Sima Guang used both primary and secondary documents to recount and comment on Chinese history by arranging the data into a comprehensive chronology. Xu Bing, however, personally invented four thousand characters in the style common in the Northern Song, carved them into wooden blocks, and hand-printed and hand-bound four volumes that can be read with neither sound nor meaning. In describing the work, Xu Bing says: "In *A Book from the Sky*, I was using traditional culture to reinterpret and subvert culture . . . the sincere and formal grandeur of the work comes out of China's high and weighty cultural tradition, but then at the center you find a joke."

However, for viewers, no matter whether or not they have knowledge of the Cultural Revolution, the disorder, the violent strokes, and the strong red and black colors in Wu Shanzhuan's work do not evoke humor but instead usually induce a reaction of horror; the work *Red Humor* is a comment on the absurdity of a horrific period. Until the Cultural Revolution can be openly studied in China, Wu Shanzhuan must use the word "humor" to mask its terrible memories. Since the work does not stop at critiquing the horrific time itself, but also touches on the prohibition of serious study and analysis of the period, perhaps it would be better called *Red Absurdity*.

Similarly, instead of humor, I find frustration and a strong sense of social mission in Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky*. What he refers to as a "joke" is his discovery of a social paradox: a means of communication losing its communicative function through its capacity for estrangement, or "alienation" in Marxist terms. Xu Bing's effort reflects the controversy of the mid to late 1980s over modernity. Whereas most scholars search for aesthetic rationality, Xu Bing, like a few other cutting-edge artists, began to face the serious challenge of pursuing modernity or postmodernity. His situation is best compared to modernist writers as described by Xu Zidong, who speaks of their unceasing efforts in the search for the foundation of national culture and the psychological crisis resulting from their experience of the loss of Han culture, calling them "the genuine modernists of our literature."[37]

In *A Book from the Sky*, history—or what Xu Bing considered "traditional culture"—consists only of visual references: font styles, bookbinding method, and means of display, which are removed from their historical context. Xu Bing's characters, though retaining the old forms and made in the same way, are transformed into "pure" image, or simulacrum. Early installations of this work resonated with the tradition of word-worship; they echoed the tradition of word display—the engraving of granite slabs or steles; the preservation of the written word through multiple rubbings of such steles; the relocation of steles to secure places; and the assumption of a status akin to that of an altar by collections of steles. In Xu Bing's work it all ends at the visual surface, without any access to any meaning. If it is an altar, it is one that destabilizes the relationship between image and meaning.

While following the principles of Chinese character making, Xu Bing's invented words are not readable. Even though all of them are made up of the appropriate strokes, only whole component parts of a genuine character convey the phonetic and "radical"—which are often pictograms—to carry information and indications of meaning. When these component parts and strokes are assembled in an unconventional way, meaning and sound are lost, while the images, the "characters," remain. Thus, this work mocks this monument to national identity; it reestablishes a new identity that is grand and heroic but also absurd, thereby carrying profound meaning. Using references from both Chinese and recent traditions, this new identity speaks of a Chinese culture caught up in a twentieth-century cultural confusion, one in which localized visual cultures were imported mostly from Europe and the former Soviet Union. This mixed identity was not recognized at the time the works were first exhibited. One pseudo-Marxist art theorist who studied in the Soviet Union at the end of Stalin's era harshly criticized Xu Bing's effort this way:

> I have always felt that when people do something they must have a clear goal, for themselves, for others, for the people, for all mankind; to have no purpose at all is absurd and dissolute. If I am asked to evaluate *A Book from the Sky*, I can only say that it gathers together the formalistic, abstract, subjective, irrational, anti-art, anti-traditional . . . qualities of the New Wave of fine arts, and ushers the Chinese New Wave towards a ridiculous impasse.

What this theorist did not understand was the deep cultural roots on which Xu Bing's works are based in attempting to delineate the idea of our modernity.[38] Within about ten years, Xu Bing's pilgrimage in quest of Chinese identity resulted in a transformed postmodern identity that rose from the ashes of the old—a cultural phoenix that "makes more universal statements . . . and seeks to create a viable alternative to the older art."[39] *A Book from the Sky* is now an icon, an emblematic piece that stands for the very position of Chinese art in the international art world. Ironically, even as authoritative Chinese socialist art critics were denouncing Xu Bing's work, critics from the West were not only embracing it, but also claiming that works of this kind "are part of the global context of our time."[40]

Word making and remaking have always been politically charged. The power to control words means the power to control people's thinking and ideas. The tyrant emperor of the third century BCE, Qin Shi Huang, standardized the writing system at the same time that he unified China, forcing all the states he conquered to adopt the Qin written script as a symbol of cohesive cultural orientation and identity. He or his bureaucrats amalgamated the locally diverse written logos into a single "universal" one, the hegemonic Qin script, thereby privileging it as the centralized written language. By forcibly imposing this centralized writing scheme as the standard, Qin Shi Huang unwittingly established a cultural system that has lasted more than two thousand years. The logographic images of the ideogram-based Chinese writing system are now recognized internationally, even if not understood. One can only imagine what the world of Chinese culture might be today if the variant scripts of the Qin era had not been unified. Just as there are a number of European languages today that share Romanic roots, the Chu, Qi, Yan, and Zhao scripts could have become separate, Huaxia-based languages.

Although a number of dynasties and rulers made minor modifications to the Chinese written script over the past two thousand years, the most fundamental change in the writing system was the simplification of written script in the early 1950s, undertaken with the aim of facilitating the acquisition of literacy by the masses. By adopting a substantial number of simplified characters—many of which were not created from scratch but had been in popular use since the time of the Six Dynasties—the communist regime also acquired absolute power to control both ideology and its interpretation. The systematically renewed word images symbolized a new cultural identity, one that attempted to include the masses.

If the remaking of words was meant to serve a more powerful system of communication or a wider audience, Xu Bing's "words" frustrated viewers' conventional communication expectations.

Because these “words” were no longer oriented toward localized information, and because they were equally meaningless to all viewers, whether or not they could read Chinese, they transformed a local communicative system into a global noncommunicating system. By blocking word recognition, these “pictograms” can no longer be considered “Chinese words” but mere logograms that only seem to belong to Chinese culture, based on their similarity to actual characters. Britta Erickson entitled her book on Xu Bing’s works *The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words.*[41] This title inspires me to question whether such pictograms are actually words or logos. For logos to be called words they must convey meaning; but meaning, as we all know, can be conveyed by either word or picture. This situation is more like a basic form of the disjunctive syllogism: either (A) a word conveys meaning, or (B) a word does not convey meaning. This implies that if A is true, B is false, and if B is true, A is false; A and B cannot both be true. We must choose whether these images are words that have no meaning or are not words, but rather groups of symbols from which meaning can be extricated. Every true word is established through an “agreement” reached through history and custom, and becomes a shared practice of people who we identify as having the same culture. Meaning is always interpreted on the basis of this mutual understanding and practice.

As discussed earlier, the concept of meaning is a discourse of interpretation within the context of Chinese culture, a discourse in which the understanding of a message or thought that is communicated through text/words intended to convey the message or thought. Xu Bing’s “words” (whether they be logos or pictograms) are intended to convey no fixed message, and each can be interpreted in myriad ways. That is, the relationship between the meaning, *yi*, and the image, *xiang*, can never be established. However, the number of interpretations that can be derived from these images, either through an attempted reading of the component parts—that is, through their misreading—is not only meaningful, but is infinite. Although the Chinese discourse of word interpretation suggests that books cannot exhaust words, and words cannot exhaust meanings, Xu Bing’s word-images are derived from but also transcend the traditional bounds of word-image and meaning. *A Book from the Sky* tells the story of a nation that has an ever-changing identity, with which it is forever coping. The work lies within the context of a Chinese discourse of interpretation: the relationship of meaning, image, and words—a third-century aesthetic development of an earlier philosophical proposition.

Behind the work, behind the relationship of meaning and word-image, is a Daoist-like perseverance and tenacity; and beyond all is a renewal of the classic Chinese aesthetic sense. Perfection of skill in the carving of the characters and in the processes of printing and bookbinding renders the mode of production meditative, full of aesthetic sensibility, and in tune with the values of modern art. The display of Xu Bing's works closely resembles the atmosphere in the Forest of Stele Museum in Xi'an, and the annual airings of the painted scroll collections in both the Central Academy of Arts and its affiliated Professional Middle School, where there are hundreds, even thousands, of scrolls in storage. However, for me the installation of Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* is *particularly* reminiscent of the airing of scroll paintings, in terms of the ceremonial atmosphere and the reverence of the viewers. Students of the academy must have special permission to enter the large, well-ventilated classrooms where the paintings are hanging, and the impressive quality and quantity of works is more overwhelmingly breathtaking than the installations we usually see in exhibitions.

To sum up, works by Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, and other artists of the New Wave since the 1980s have participated in a Chinese discourse in response to China's social problems, while drawing from the Western art of the postindustrial period. Their works speak of the artists' fragmented memories, particularly their traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution, as well as of visual hybridity and relativism, playfulness and parody of certain aspects of Chinese culture and politics. When it came to an ideological stance, the targets of the works were always aspects of communist governance of China in the Mao era or earlier. With this body of work that has been promoted outside China, we begin to realize that China's postmodern art represents the way that we, people outside China, view China.

ARTISTS AS ETHNOGRAPHERS: ART IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WESTERN

Many Chinese artists came to live in the United States after the mid-1980s. By the early 1990s, some of them had become popular and even famous. Such artists and their works engaged in the postmodern discourse of identity, pluralism, and self-representation and involved themselves in—and stimulated—the use of ethnographic methods in researching their culture for appropriate materials to use. However, once these artists started working outside China they were moved to address broader issues that went beyond local cultural concerns. After the 1990s, the former avant-garde artists who played a major role in the 1980s dispersed into two groups, and each group gained new blood. One group stayed in China, continuing to work with more internationally oriented cultural issues and at the same time bringing elements of their ethnic culture into the market for New International Art. "Since 1989 and the government attacks on intellectual culture, the Avant-garde Movement in China has weakened. With the increasing emphasis on the immediate economic benefits of any activity, both official and popular culture has common priorities that are significantly different from those of the intellectuals."[42] These artists travel to other countries for exhibitions, but return to China and the cultural foundations that legitimize them. While they may be of the "Third World," they participate in the capitalist social discourse and manifest the "discursive division between the first and third world."[43] As in other spheres, within these markets, Homi Bhabha states, "vicious circuits of surplus value link First World capital and Third World labor markets through the chain of the international division of labor and national comprador classes."[44] In this reading, these artists are third world exploited labor.

Residing within Anglo-American and European societies, the second group is not the traditional "ethnic other," such as the second- or third-generation Asian Americans whose works often address the ethnic Other's political struggle, for example, the racial problem in the United States. In the spectrum of works identified with "the Other" in the West, this "Other" group from contemporary China is uninterested in displaying their abjection or representing the condition of abjection.[45] While some of them express a passion for signs and forms, others are distinguished by their social and cultural critique of the trans-socialist China, a state that is neither fully socialist nor capitalist, or sometimes by the traditional China in their memories and knowledge. These artists neither identify themselves with Mainland China nor with the older generations of overseas Chinese. Most of them have avoided, or at least failed to address, current Chinese problems, even if on the surface their art deals with Chinese political issues—particularly in the eyes of those who equate socialism with Stalinism.

This second group is important in the West, however; riding the wave of postcolonialism, they make up the majority of displaced artists and their activities worldwide. While the first group continues to address Chinese local cultural issues in the face of the ever-increasing social pressures on them in China itself, they progressively move toward cooperation with the new international art market, producing works that are more harmless in subject matter and stimulating in style and physical presentation than are marketable in the West. The artists of the second group, overseas sojourners, are now the main force of global capitalist art in the postcolonial world, using their art in response (and resistance) to colonialism.

CLASSROOM SQUARE CHARACTERS

Since he moved to New York, Xu Bing's works have undergone a fundamental change. While he continues to question written words, his newly crafted characters have transformed a local perspective into a global one. In his pursuit of art in his new location, Xu Bing continues to use the traditional form of Chinese characters, but also attempts to depict the cultural relationship between Western culture and that of China. Now that he has lived in New York for some time, his relationship with the West is not the same as it was when he lived in China. In *Classroom Square Characters*, he can no longer ignore his non-Chinese-speaking audience. Repositioning his cultural relationship with his new environment was both urgent and necessary. His work using "New English Calligraphy," which he invented, renders the Latin alphabet in the shape and style of Chinese calligraphy in a way that is meaningful and understandable to the English-speaking viewer—a result of his cultural readjustment. His work is ever more playful. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer encounters a classroom-like space with all the accoutrements for calligraphy writing, in particular a "traditional-looking" book of model calligraphy consisting of rubbings of words incised in stone. But these words, which share the style of Yan Zhenqing of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), are New English letter/characters. There are also exercise books for viewers to use in practicing these, and a blackboard of instructions for brush holding and stroke making written with white chalk. In one corner of the classroom a television set delivers a lecture on calligraphy. The language used in the work is, of course, English; but the visual presentation follows a strictly Chinese traditional approach to the practice of calligraphy.

A famous diagram that explains the art of stroke making in calligraphy (Figure 1.4), attributed to Yan Zhenqing but possibly dating from an earlier time, was transplanted by Xu Bing into his "New Calligraphy" in order to explain stroke making in English. Although this work also exemplifies the forced fissure in the inseparable relationship of words and meanings, the use of a classic Chinese calligraphy approach in English text writing displaces both languages to create something unfamiliar to both cultures. To further complicate the experience, Xu Bing sometimes quotes Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book* in texts written in this new type of calligraphy.

In constructing this work, Xu Bing has gone beyond, but not abandoned, the traditional weighty burden carried by Chinese intellectuals. His *Classroom Square Characters* is a good example of interculturality; it captures his understanding of the constantly changing relationship between him, the world around him, and the lives of the "Other." It is not an artwork of overlapping subjects possessing two different forms of knowledge and experience of the West and the "Other"; rather it "involves a repositioning of the self both intellectually and at the level of 'felt' reality, the apprehension of relationships and material reality and their impact

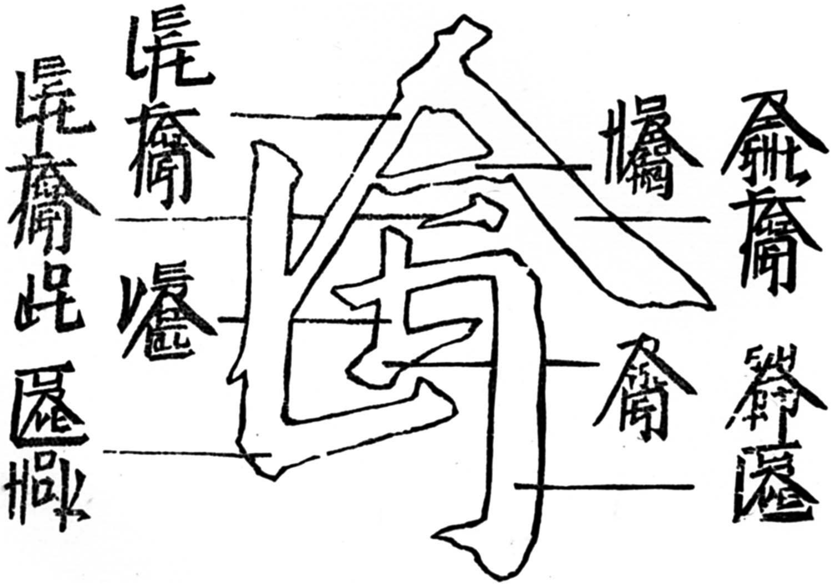

FIGURE 1.4. Xu Bing's diagram on naming the strokes. (Courtesy of the artist.)

on us as thinking, feeling beings."[46] Xu Bing engages in ethnographic practices in his art making, giving rise to multiple voices in his works.

WHEN DIFFERENCE BECOMES IDENTITY: A CONCLUSION

Fredric Jameson has pointed out that economy is culture in a time of globalization. In what Ernst Mandel calls a purer stage of capitalism—our own—the distinction between economics and culture has disappeared and "[c]ommodification today is also aestheticization"[47]

Karl Marx noticed 150 years ago that the world market imparts a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.[48] Similarly, global capitalism deploys and depends on the discourse of differences in strategy making. Within the context of global space, everybody is located in a transcultural position: even while self and Other encounter each other, both are simultaneously displaced.

Within the economic context of globalization, works of Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, and Xu Bing are part of a global capitalist art; although Wu works from China, his market, too, is outside China. The dynamic new waves of Chinese art in the contemporary global capitalist art market are the result of the expansion of Western global strategy, which, in turn, is "part of the global context of our time."[49] Or, "to put it another way, cultural globalization is the process in which we can observe both the universalization of Western modernity and the emergence of alternative modernities."[50] To the Others, "the West-centered, challenge-response paradigm of global-local interactions may not be universally applicable. The Chinese case demonstrates a new type of cultural globalization: a managed process . . . [in which Chinese artists] actively claim ownership of the emerging global culture."[51] In many ways, they have forced mainstream Western art to compromise with Western culture by incorporating Chinese visual and linguistic features. Their works and the visual traditions articulated in those works "add to" the Anglo-American postmodern discourse, while also "summing up"[52] and recasting what "Western" means.

More than a half century ago, Walter Benjamin posited the relationship between artistic authority and cultural politics by suggesting that artists who work with ideological patronage were passive Others.[53] In the global capitalist art world, the ethnographic turn in, or the discourse about, contemporary art provides an international, cultural space that allows Chinese artists entry. Their identity is transformed or split by entering the transnational art industry space, but the recontextualization of cultural iconography within the global capitalist art arena allows the Chinese people to "come see themselves once again at the center of a world."[54]

This chapter has discussed examples of art from China of the past two decades. The claim is that a Chinese model of cultural hybridization has established a new story line that narrates at least two versions of postmodernity and two versions of the relationship between local and global: that of the West and that of China. Or, said in another way, difference becomes identity in the art world in the era of global capitalism. The artists discussed have been accepted in the West as a part of difference, not as a part of influence. Sadly, we have yet to see how these transcultural artists, namely, Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, and Xu Bing, may actually influence the international art world. Although they continue to provide diversity in the international art market, their contribution is not much more than an addition to the late capitalist global portrait of a postindustrial world. This situation will not change before the discourse, system of critique, and the market have all adjusted to the rising fame of these artists. What is even more problematic is that as part of the global game with transcultural players, they do not fit into any locally oriented cultural schema centered on China—whether it be in terms of the discourse, the value system, or the market. Ironically, the ambiguity inherent in locally oriented logos sends a complex message to Chinese audiences that allow them to misread the situation as a *Chinese triumph.*

NOTES

1. It is difficult to define the parameters of contemporary Chinese art. At the very least we should distinguish two different types. Since 2000, the Chinese government has recognized that the idea of contemporary Chinese art can help build the image of a "contemporary China," and it has organized many exhibitions of what can be seen as contemporary Chinese art in various world metropolises. As early as 1989, nonofficial exhibitions organized by galleries, university museums, and other museums outside China provided an alternative definition of contemporary Chinese art. In this chapter, the definition used is based on the latter, as defined by art critics and scholars outside China.

2. Peter Berger and Samuel P. Huntington, *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33.
3. Berger and Huntington, *Many Globalizations*, 34.
4. David G. Wilkins, Bernard Schultz, and Katheryn M. Linduff, *Art Past Art Present*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 585.
5. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 139.
6. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 203.
7. Andrew Solomon, "Irony, and Art Will Change China," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, December 19, 1993.
8. Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 25.
9. These words from Spivak are quoted in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 20.
10. In his essay, "Where Do Correct Thoughts Come From?," Timothy Cheek articulates, from a different perspective, how, in the past hundred years, China looked for theoretical authority to various Western leading scholars of culture and political studies.
11. Timothy Cheek quotes Dr. Gloria Davies, "Anticipating Community, Producing Dissent: The Politics of Recent Chinese Intellectual Praxis," *China Review* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 2–3. See also "Where Do Correct Ideas Come From? Xu Jilin and the Search for a Theory of Practice among Contemporary Chinese Intellectuals," University of British Columbia. Article draft for the China Studies Group, Centre for Chinese Research, IAR/UBC, August 2004, 1.
12. Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago), 176.
13. Michael Sullivan, "Art and Reality in Twentieth Century Chinese Painting," in *Twentieth-Century Chinese Painting*, ed. Kao Mayching (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1990), 18.
14. See Chang Tsong-zung, ed., *Xingxing shinian* (The Stars: Ten Years) (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1989); exhibition catalogue. For a concise overview of the development of Chinese contemporary art as a project of modernity and its relationship with the West (including the Stars), see Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity," in *Inside Out*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 15–22.
15. Orville Schell and David Shambaugh, *The China Reader: The Reform Era* (Toronto and New York: Vintage, 1999), 157.

16. Ibid., 158.
17. Demonstration of the Star Group. The name of this group has been variously translated as “Star Group,” or the “Stars.” Both are mistranslations. The name refers to an ancient phrase Mao Zedong borrowed as a theme for a letter to Lin Biao to persuade Lin that although the numbers of Red Army soldiers were small, they are like sparks, *xingxing* 星星 (literally “star star”), that could set the prairie ablaze. Hence, I always want to call this group the “Sparks.”
18. See Chang; for a discussion of the impact of the Stars exhibitions, see Wu Hung, 17–18.
19. *Newsweek*, October 15, 1979.
20. Norman Bryson, “The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde,” in *Inside Out*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 51–52.
21. Jacques Lacan, *The Line and Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 103.
22. Zhao Li and Yu Ding, eds., *1542–2000: Documenting Chinese Oil Painting*. (Changsha: Hunan Art Press, 2002), 482.
23. The original Chinese is as follows: “ . . . . . . 二十世纪的中国艺坛, 也应当现出一种新兴 的气象了: 让我们起来吧!用狂飘一般的激情, 铁一般 的理智, 来制造我们色、线、形交错的世界吧!” See ibid.
24. In Peter G. Rowe and Seng Kuan, *Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), the discussion on *Ti yong bian* (体用辩) is important for our understanding of the culture of twentieth-century China. The choice of using the Western early modern art style is also related to the fact that in the early twentieth century, two major groups of artists returning from Europe had a strong impact on China’s art education. Xu Beihong, who learned directly from the Classicism that became the dominant force in delivering the communist ideal, was representative of one; the other group, led by Liu Haishu, attempted to promote Western modern art theory as similar to the theory of the traditional-type Chinese art literati. The debate between Xu and Liu art resulted in Xu’s belief in realism being adopted as official art, while Liu’s effort was criticized as indulging in petty bourgeoisie pursuit of the little pleasures of life—just as the literati artists were criticized during this time. The Stars, who adhered to the style promoted by Liu, were condemned by the authorities over the past three decades when they rebelled against the norms of art at this later time.
25. János Mátyás Kovács, “Rival Temptations and Passive Resistance: Cultural Globalization in Hungary,” In *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, ed. Peter Berger, 146–182 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 167.
26. Ibid., 25.
27. Ibid.

28. Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 14. This story of Xu Bing reminds me of a childhood experience of my own. During the first part of the Cultural Revolution we lived not very far from a huge house that was turned into a storehouse for things that were confiscated during that time. One day, my brothers came home with the secret that this huge house was filled with books—hardcover books—and that these books might soon be sent to a paper factory. At night, they went back to the house to ask the old, illiterate guard to let them in so they could read some of those good books. Soon my brothers came out in great disappointment—all the stored books were in Braille.
29. Unpublished interview with Xu Bing, October 2000, Portland State University.
30. *Chinese Art Weekly* (*Zhongguo Meishu Bao* 中国美术报), 1986, 33.
31. Wu Shanzhuan, "About the Red Humor," *Meishu Sichao* (*Art Waves*) 1 (1987): 23.
32. Ibid.
33. See *Yijing* [*Zhouyi]* 44/*xishang/*12. Cf. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, *I Ching or Book of Changes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 322.
34. *Zhuangzi* (Peking: Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series Supplement 20, 1947), 75/26/48–9.
35. See Wang Bi, *Zhouyi Lueli* (1965), 10b–11b.
36. See Wang Zhaowen, *One Is Equal to Ten* (一 以当十) (Beijing: Zhaohua Meishu Press, 1956).
37. Xu Zitong, "Xungen wenxuezhongde Jia Pingwa he Ah Cheng" [Jia Pingwa and Ah Cheng in Root-Searching Literature], *Bulletin of Chinese Studies* 3 (1996): 81–91.
38. Yang Chengying, "Xu Bing de Yishu: Behind the Success," *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* 22 (1989).
39. Wilkins, et al., op. cit., 585.
40. Ibid.
41. Erickson, op. cit., 7.
42. Wilkins, Schultz, and Linduff, *Art Past Art Present*, 585.
43. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 20.
44. Ibid.
45. With a few exceptions, such as Liu Hung, professor of Visual Art at Mills College, California, whose work *Fortune Cookies* addressed the traditional Asian-American social issues.
46. M. Byram, *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 1989), 6, 42.
47. Fredric Jameson, "Globalization and Political Strategy," *New Left Review* 4 (July–August 2000): 49–68.

48. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Signet Classics, 1998).
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