

A Dilemma in Contemporary Chinese Art

An Introduction

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Is contemporary Chinese art “Chinese” art? Chapters in this collection attempt to address this question by investigating the relationship between ancient Chinese philosophy and the ideas being expressed in contemporary Chinese art at a time when this art becomes increasingly popular in the West. Contemporary Chinese art is in a cultural dilemma. On the one hand, it is not exactly “Chinese” even though it does address the Chinese experience and its issues. And on the other hand, it cannot abandon this “Chinese” identity because it is only by labeling itself “Chinese” that it can gain a place in the international art arena. Today the expression *contemporary art discourse* is almost synonymous with Western contemporary art discourse. Contemporary art has been vetted and evaluated internationally under Western assumptions about modernity and postmodernity. Within this rather narrowly defined cultural space, the relative position of contemporary art from China has been an important issue for artists and art historians. The identity of contemporary Chinese art is often challenged by the competing claims that it is either derivative of Western contemporary art or that it has been defined within the indigenous cultural identity of China and is thus the manifestation of contemporary China.

This dialogue about contemporary Chinese art began as early as 1981 when China was recovering from the Stars Group, an art movement driven by social protest that anticipated the New Wave

of 1985. David Hockney visited the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing where a young teacher asked him, “‘What national exhibitions are there in England?’ Puzzled, David responded with an ‘Er . . . ’ Then he hazarded: ‘Well, the best is the Royal Academy. It’s mostly for amateurs.’ Another ‘er. . . .’”¹

A thousand years ago in China, the pioneers of literati art set themselves up against the court practitioners, using their amateur art as a media for critiquing government policies. Chinese artists in the 1980s were heirs to this same pattern: they either belonged to the camp under the sway of official socialist ideology and reputable national exhibitions, or they belonged to an independent, nongovernmental supported avant-gardism. It was not that Chinese artists did not try to revitalize the literati tradition, but the mid-1980s New Literati Art Movement deteriorated into a playfulness of ink and brush that was characteristic of literati art in late imperial times. The urge to find a powerful language to strike out against the official control of art was indeed the initial motivation of Chinese artists who looked to Western contemporary visual language as a resource. Moral support for these Chinese artists came from foreign diplomats, visiting scholars, and foreign students residing in China.

In the early 1990s, the contemporary Chinese art movement was forced to go underground and Chinese artists found the West as a new audience for their works. An increasingly active dialogue has emerged between the local (Chinese) and the global (Euro-American) worlds, raising the visibility of China’s new art to unprecedented heights. Andrew Solomon’s influential essay, “Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China,” published in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (1993), made an indelible impact on the view of contemporary Chinese art among a growing Western audience.² However, Homi Bhabha has offered an ominous warning about these Chinese artists: “Despite the claims to [what is] a spurious rhetoric of ‘internationalism,’ the relationship between Chinese artists and the postmodern art world is that they live in ‘the nations of others.’”³

In this volume, we hoped to investigate this issue of “otherness” from different angles:

1. Are these Chinese artists ideologically “imprisoned” as they depend on the Western social system and discourse for their life and art?

2. Does the use of Chinese-segmented visual and linguistic marks and traditions “add to” the Anglo-American post-modern discourse “without adding up”⁴ to anything itself?

To put it simply, is Chinese contemporary art rooted in the tradition of Chinese culture, or is it yet another excellent example of cultural self-colonization?

In order to investigate these questions, the contributors to this volume have attempted to relate Chinese artistic expression to the structure and function of the Chinese language and to the unadvertised assumptions of Chinese natural cosmology. Many of the world’s cosmologies associate language and cosmic creativity, from “in the beginning was the word” to aboriginal Australians who believe that order is created and sustained through song. A major theme in the *Yijing (Book of Changes 易经)*, a text that grounds the evolution of Confucian and Daoist cosmology, is the fertile and productive relationship between image, language, and meaning. Can we go beyond the more obvious political and social commentaries on contemporary Chinese art to find resonances between some of these artistic ideas and the indigenous sources of Chinese cultural self-understanding? This volume is dedicated to an exploration of how Xu Bing and other artists have navigated between two different cultural sites and established a “third” place from which they are able to appropriate novel Western ideas to address centuries old Chinese cultural issues within a Chinese cultural discourse.

There are at least four reasons for selecting the art of Xu Bing as a central focus for this volume. First and foremost is the nature of Xu Bing’s work. *A Book from the Sky*, for example, incorporates over four thousand characters that were fabricated using the theoretical principles of word making in the written Chinese language. They look like Chinese characters but none of the characters could be pronounced in Chinese nor did they possess shared, designated meanings. They are unintelligible to an otherwise literate audience. These characters can be “meaningful” only when “read” outside of normal linguistic practices. As Bei Dao, a contemporary Chinese poet, has said of Xu Bing’s characters: “You are nothing but a pictograph that has lost its sound.”

The second reason for using Xu Bing’s work as an axis of discussion is that both editors, Tsao and Ames, are enamored with Xu Bing’s *A Book from the Sky*, believing that it has much to offer as a heuristic for reflecting upon the role of language and meaning-making

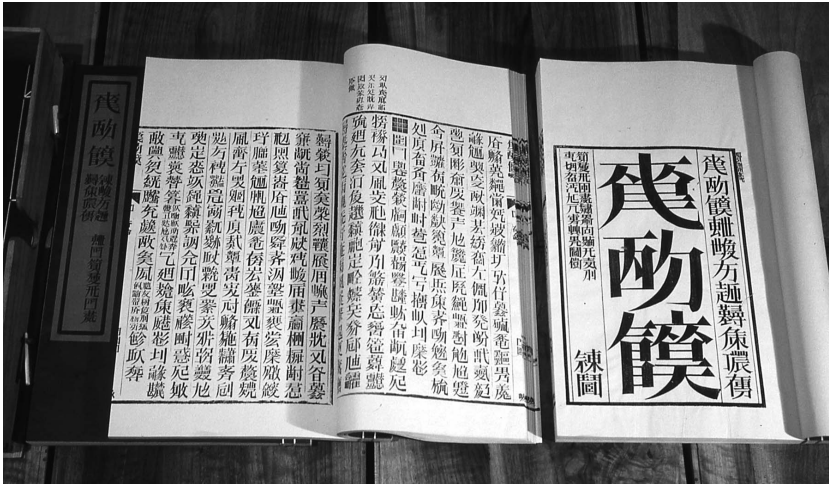


FIGURE I.I. *A Book from the Sky* (*Tian shu* 天书), Xu Bing, 1987–1991. Above: detail of pages from two of the set of four books. Below: Installation view. (Courtesy of the artist.)

in the traditional Chinese cultural discourse. It provides an occasion for bringing into focus commonalities that are broadly shared by philosophy, history, art, and culture, while allowing each of these disciplines to speak from their own unique perspective.

The third, but equally important reason for engaging Xu Bing's oeuvre is that this work allows critics to look at Chinese culture in a panoramic way. Xu Bing's "text" carries the conversation back into the wealth of ancient Chinese culture and forward into China's recent launch into the international contemporary art world. *A Book from the Sky* is a spectacle that requires us to locate contemporary Chinese art within its cultural context, allowing that this work was admittedly crafted under the invisible influence of Western post-modern culture at a time when the Chinese authorities—political and academic—exerted a concentrated effort to prohibit its people from studying the issues of postmodernity.

Finally, both editors are persuaded that there is real aesthetic profundity in Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* as a work of art itself. It is a piece that provokes animated theorizing among its readers as in the substance of this volume. At the same time, it resists any reduction to specific abstract explanations. Like all great art, it is bottomless, allowing us in our appreciation only to "get on with it" as opposed to "getting it right."

There are seven chapters in this collection. Tsao Hsingyuan begins the volume by offering the general background needed to contextualize the contemporary art scene in China, illustrating how artists have sought to please different audiences under different circumstances. In "Reading and Misreading: Double Entendre in Locally Oriented Logos," Tsao's primary focus is the audiences for contemporary Chinese art. Tsao suggests that the term "avant-garde" was used to describe contemporary art in China simply because in the 1970s it served the Chinese artist as a way of deploying Western modern art language to challenge the grip of political and authoritarian control through a kind of cultural insurgency. However, after 1989, the audience for contemporary Chinese art shifted from a strained, sometimes shrill polemic with the Chinese authorities to a dialogue with an increasingly appreciative Western audience that had emerged through the international commoditization of their work. Still, Tsao argues, while some Chinese artists have self-consciously divorced themselves from traditional Chinese culture, the diluted relationship between geographical site and cultural experience brought on by globalization has allowed other Chinese artists,

such as Xu Bing, to achieve a kind of “interculturality” by presenting a strong Chinese cultural identity in an international forum.

Such “interculturality” might sound liberating, but Tsao Hsingyuan, invoking the specter of the global capitalist art world, rejects any naïve assumption that the cultural specificity and “localness” of Chinese artists such as Xu Bing represent some kind of Chinese triumph in which these artists have a transformative affect on world art. Tsao cautions that, on the contrary, these artists are being absorbed wholesale into the discourses and corporate values of a global postindustrialist capitalism that is not of their own making, and that in many ways contradicts the substance of their own traditional Chinese culture.

Roger T. Ames, in “Reading Xu Bing’s *A Book from the Sky*: A Case Study in the Making of Meaning,” appeals to the canons of the Chinese philosophical tradition to bring detail and textual specificity to some of the more general claims about a persistent Chinese cultural identity being made by Tsao Hsingyuan. He associates the characters in Xu Bing’s *A Book from the Sky* with the “fish traps” and “rabbit snares” metaphors for catching meaning that we find in Daoist writings. He argues that language is self-referencing, and that the meaning of a word is a function of its use within a language system. The act of ordering the world through language does not begin from assumptions about a “literal” language that, in mapping onto a given “reality,” enables us to reference things in the world correctly. Rather, the use of language requires that we constantly adjust and reinvest words and their meanings with the practical intention of increasing communal harmony and significance. This is perhaps what Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) means in claiming that art should be more real than reality. Once the situated meaning has been “trapped” and expressed in these particular words, the words are then “emptied” and stand available for further deployment in capturing and conveying new meanings.

To the extent that *A Book from the Sky* is identifiable as “language” and yet stands empty, we are confronted with linguistic “ruins” that threaten our faith in the persistence of a shared dogma, a shared common sense. On the one hand, this is a disturbing, even startling, experience that undermines our feelings of communal solidarity and our assumed competence within our community, underscoring perhaps a sense of the ultimate precariousness of the human experience. However, as the reassurance of shared linguistic “objectivity” recedes from sight, we are renewed as unique,

historical, contingent, and provisional beings that struggle with imagination to quite literally make sense of the nonsense. Xu Bing's work forces us to appreciate our own role in the making of meaning, renewing our confidence in our own subjectivity. Indeed, Xu Bing in offering us his empty "traps" is challenging us to capture a new world impressed with new meanings of our own making.

Kuan-Hung Chen shares a common starting point with Ames in his "Seriousness, Playfulness, and a Religious Reading of *A Book from the Sky*," but focuses on the religious implications of Xu Bing's work. Chen argues that *A Book from the Sky* has a profoundly religious import, and with its movement between seriousness and playfulness, allows us to distinguish Xu Bing's inclusive religiousness from the more familiar exclusive paradigm of religion. As a basis for framing his discussion of inclusive and exclusive religiousness, Chen uses John Dewey's distinction between a liberating, unique expression of religiousness and the often oppressive, suffocating strictures and dogma of institutionalized religion.

Exclusive religiousness is based upon a kind of transcendentalism that utterly separates the object of reverence from the supplicant, operating within a clear dualistic paradigm. The problem with applying this model to a reading of Xu Bing's work is that a Western audience familiar with exclusive religiousness but having little or no background in Chinese culture will conclude that there is little religious import in Xu Bing's work. Of course, this response is prompted by the fact that the transcendental ground of exclusive religiousness has little relevance for traditional Chinese philosophical and religious sensibilities. Further, the "One behind the many" model of religiousness with all of its accoutrements of a 'Reality' behind appearance and its single, universal 'Truth' precludes the playfulness that is so evident in *A Book from the Sky*.

Chen appeals to a mantra often invoked by scholars of pre-modern China to define religiousness—"the continuity between humanity and the divine (*tianren heyi* 天人合一)"—as a basis for arguing for the inclusive nature of the Chinese religious experience. The *qi* 气 cosmology, which serves as the interpretive context of traditional Chinese culture, begins from the wholeness of experience and the unbroken continuity among the unique things and events that constitute it. In the absence of some transcendental ground, religious meaning is made through productive correlations that allow for both persistence and novelty, for continuity and uniqueness, for reverence and a creative playfulness. Indeed, it is

only when Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* is understood in terms of this inclusive religious sensibility that the audience is able to appreciate both the sophisticated profundity of the work and its openness to creative play.

In his chapter, "Making Natural Languages in Contemporary Chinese Art," Richard Vinograd first defines his terms. "Natural languages" is a broad category of textual rather than spoken language ranging from Chinese characters and trigrams to tattoos and talismans that are perceived as having their source in nature rather than in culture. "Chinese" references the early training and culturally based allusions of these contemporary artists. By using the term "making," Vinograd captures the paradoxes inherent in the contribution of these Chinese artists to the contemporary art world: the seeming artificiality, meaninglessness, and obscurity of the putatively "natural" languages. The specific work of Xu Bing is not an altogether unusual phenomenon in the language-based art that has been an important part of public consciousness during and following the Maoist era.

In several of his projects, such as *Square Word Calligraphy* and *A Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing plays on a tension between the anticipated familiarity expected from a natural language and the frustration or anxiety one feels in encountering its defamiliarized and estranged form. In spite of the magnitude of these installations and the obvious labor that has gone into their construction—Xu Bing's and other artists as well—the role of the spectator is paramount. Whatever meaning or lack of it that such projects are able to communicate, it is not a message from artist to viewer but an encounter between the embedded graphs and the viewer's response, even when the response is one of utter bemusement.

Vinograd rehearses a range of Xu Bing's artworks in which each mode of natural language represents an alternative to our expectations around conventional language. There is a difference between "seeing" and "reading" that places an enormous burden of recognition on the viewer that is required for decoding and decipherment. In all of this, there seems to be a mistrust of conventional language and pessimism about the possibility of meaningful communication. The natural languages are repeatedly referenced in ways that defer the usual expectations of legibility and meaning. Perhaps there is some compensation in the aesthetic deployment of these natural languages, which require further probing to reveal deep and abiding cultural identities.

In her chapter “The Living Word: Xu Bing and the Art of Chan Wordplay,” April Liu begins with Xu Bing’s professed interest in Chan Buddhism. The strategies for indirect communication that we find in Xu Bing’s art find immediate resonance with images of the Chan tradition as a possible cultural resource—associations with the “*gongan* 公案” or nonsensical dialogue form, the frequent use of wordplay and paradox, the use of repetitive, menial tasks as a meditative heuristic, and so on. But Liu poses the challenging question: whose Chan anyway? That is, does Xu Bing appeal to traditional understandings of a decidedly Chinese variation on an antique Indian philosophy and religion, or is he playing to a thin, popular, “Westernized” version of the same?

Liu identifies three moments in Xu Bing’s entry into the international art world that we might associate with Chan Buddhism. First, in *A Book from the Sky*, without explicit reference to Chan, Xu Bing attempts to communicate by subverting the expectations of existing cultural and linguistic frameworks through the use of empty signifiers. Second, in his recent prize-winning installation *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* Xu Bing includes a direct reference to a familiar Chan poem where its original meaning is itself subverted by complicity in the institutionalized agenda, nationalist politics, and preexisting meanings of the international art world for whom it is displayed. And third, Xu Bing has been associated with popular, commodified representations of Chan sensibilities and a “depthless” romantic imaginaire. Within this context, Xu Bing has been challenged to open up an “alternative space” that acknowledges the Chan infiltration of popular Western culture and problematizes simple East–West, traditional–modern binaries. Still, for Liu, the most important question is not the possibility of success or failure in Xu Bing’s subverting a hegemonic Western ideology, but whether or not his Chan-inspired commitment to engaging the viewer can open up alternative ways of communication through visual art.

Kazuko Kameda-Madar, in her chapter “A Study of *Shen Wai Shen* (Body Outside Body) by Xu Bing,” explores a work by Xu Bing that literally means “the body outside the body.” This installation recontextualizes the way in which Chinese calligraphy has been historically used to transcribe the Japanese and Korean spoken languages; it reflects on how these East Asian languages have been affected by the emergence of recent digital and computer technologies.

Shen Wai Shen was presented in the exhibition at Ginza Graphic Gallery in December 2000 to explore the possibilities of the electronic publishing and book industry among East Asian countries, particularly those regions that share a common heritage of Chinese-based scripts. East Asia is currently struggling to get past persistent historical tensions to achieve some degree of political unification in the face of the growing hegemony of the Euro-American world. To this end, the organizers of the exhibition felt some urgency to seek a solution within the shared artistic, linguistic, and cultural expressions of East Asian countries. They thus invited representative artists from China, Korea, and Japan to produce artworks involving a specific passage from the classical Chinese story *Journey to the West*, an influential text in the heritage of all three cultures.

In order to investigate the political and cultural instability and the linguistic ambiguity of this region from an East Asian perspective, Kameda-Madar observes *Shen Wai Shen* through the lens of Confucian and Buddhist cosmologies, as well as from the vantage point of eighteenth-century Tokugawa-era philosophies. Her approach thus stands in stark contrast to the more common application of Western theories and ideologies that are used to study Xu Bing's work.

In this installation, Xu Bing uses the "body" of "Monkey" (Sun Wukong) as a metaphor for the Chinese writing system. Sun Wukong is known for pulling out hairs from his body, blowing them into the air, and transforming each hair into a duplicate of himself to help fight off various foes. This act of pulling out hairs and replicating himself suggests the long history of spreading the Chinese writing system from China proper to the outlying Sinitic cultures. Thus, these "bodies" are understood as the distinct new writing systems that emerged in East Asia, with each one possessing some unique asset needed to help Monkey battle against the demons.

Shen Wai Shen experiments with the degree to which the three languages that rely on the Chinese-based scripts can communicate. In the installation, as viewers randomly remove sheets of paper on which the story is written, an evolving block of a multilingual text appears. Although the text at any given time frustrates an understanding of the details of the story, the overall content of the passage is comprehensible. Thus, taken together, these languages are paradoxically at once intelligible and unintelligible. For Kameda-Madar, it is her hope that a sociopolitical reconciliation among these East Asian countries based on their overlapping traditions

will establish a new allied power that might achieve a balanced and complementary relationship with the Euro-American powers.

Jerome Silbergeld broadens the scope of the volume by locating Xu Bing among a cadre of contemporary Chinese artists. In his chapter, “The Space Between: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Contemporary Chinese Art,” Silbergeld discusses the works of four artists who work in different media: Xu Bing, Lin Zhi, Zhang Hongtu, and Jiang Wen.

Silbergeld rehearses the various different kinds of “inbetweenness” found within word and image, content and context, China and non-China, and so on. As one among several artists, certain works by Xu Bing are addressed: *A Book from the Sky*, *Square Word Calligraphy*, *Reading Landscape*, and *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*. Silbergeld proceeds from the observation that “the space between cultures, native and adopted, is frequently dark, uncomfortable, or unexplored.” Appealing to Homi Bhabha’s theory of liminal space and Rey Chow’s rejection of “absolute difference,” Silbergeld pursues a careful reading of representative artworks of these four artists to conclude that all “have developed signature styles based on borrowings from China and the West, transforming these into something neither East nor West, not just Chinese, not not Chinese. Their art creates and operates in a world of its own.”

But what does this all add up to? Silbergeld is not persuaded that these artists are necessarily going to have some transformative impact on their adopted worlds. Indeed, he leaves us with the open question: “Art is shaped by society—that can be measured in the art itself. But how does one measure whether art, in turn, changes society?”

This volume tries to provide a theoretical space to reflect on the meaning of contemporary Chinese art. Even though scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Rey Chow have complicated perceptions of the relationship between the West and the Other, they have not yet changed the binary intellectual perspectives that constantly haunt the efforts at a productive conversation between the East and the West. Proceeding from Heidegger’s claim that language is our cultural being, perhaps the key point of Xu Bing’s *A Book from the Sky* is to establish a space where the putative language, word, or script cannot be claimed by any specific culture, a space where the East and the West cannot be easily separated.

In his famous dialogue with a Japanese philosopher, Heidegger remarks, “Some time ago I called language, clumsily enough, the

house of Being. If man by virtue of his language dwells within the claim and call of Being, then we Europeans presumably dwell in an entirely different house than East Asian men.”⁵ Allowing, as with Heidegger, that in our own times these cultural differences persist, we can also claim that contemporary Chinese art is indeed “Chinese” art, and that it serves the dual function of championing the quest for artistic freedom precious to all cultures, and at the same time asking for an understanding and tolerance of the values that it represents from a sometimes reluctant West.

NOTES

1. Stephen Spender, *China Diary* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982), 31.
2. *The Sunday Magazine* of the *New York Times* 19 (1993), 42–72.
3. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 30.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1982), 1.