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**A Contemporary Spin on Tradition:
Xu Bing's Cultural Exploration**

Karen Obermeyer-Kolb

A Contemporary Spin on Tradition: Xu Bing's Cultural Exploration

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This paper analyzed the artwork of Xu Bing and his exploration of cultural values, specifically of language in China. Chinese is one of the oldest written languages of the world, with forms established by 1000CE. One of the purposes of classical Chinese calligraphy was self expression. The Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s brought a shift to this tradition by using large characters as propaganda. Xu Bing uses prominent symbols of culture and language, stemming from the classical teaching of his parents and his work experience during the Cultural Revolution, to convey views of society, as well as to challenge them. In "The Book from the Sky" he presents a confronting image of Chinese language in classical forms of scrolls and single sheets, which seems authentic but is in fact made with characters invented by the artist. The work shuns the idea of any meaning through reading and portrays the struggle of communication and keeping traditions alive. My paper argues that Xu Bing's artwork demonstrates how powerful cultural tradition can be in contemporary art. Culture provides the audience with easily recognized symbols and creates restrictions on the interpretation of the art.

How does one define a culture? There are many cultures throughout the world; the most notable differences between them are their varying placement of values. Culture is an aspect of life with a vast influence over decisions, perceptions, and expectations. Xu Bing, a contemporary Chinese artist, makes artwork that provides the viewer with many questions and evaluations about culture, more specifically, Chinese culture. China places great importance on language, with one of the first written languages it has exhibited a strong will to keep its functionality and maintain an aesthetic quality. Xu Bing was influenced by the traditions of China passed on from his family but more importantly by confusion created by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The leader of this political movement, Mao, used a simplified form of the complex and highly valued self-expressive Chinese calligraphy as propaganda. This and Mao's control and cessation of books of tradition left Xu and his generation feeling disconnected from the country's culture and history. This confusion led to a questioning of the dependability of cultural perceptions which he presents in his work. Xu's A Book from the Sky (Figure 1 and 2) "took over four years to complete [...and includes] printed volumes and scrolls containing 4,000 'false' Chinese characters invented by the artist and painstakingly hand-cut into wooden printing blocks" (Xu Bing). It was first exhibited in October 1988, then in 1989 as part of the China Avant-garde exhibition and has continued to be shown around the world. This piece illustrates Xu's cultural explorations, creating a seemingly authentic representation of history through traditional formats and process that is through further analysis a deceptive illegible puzzle.

To understand the historical connections Xu Bing makes one must first look at the great importance placed on language in Chinese culture and the traditions of its artistic past. China is a country with one of the first written languages and a strong will to keep the written language beautiful as well as functional. Xu Bing explained how at one point China was in the process of

getting rid of old characters and adding new ones and then readjusting those and commented that “to change the written word is to strike at the very foundation of a culture: to reconstruct language is to reconstruct cuts of the heart of one’s being, and should be called a ‘culture revolution’” (Xu Bing). His statement illustrates the strong connection one has to culture through language, especially in China. Even the teaching methods of language are thorough and insure the tradition of language is honored. For example, Xu Bing claims that “at the beginning of a person’s education [in China], he or she must devote many years to memorizing several thousand characters. Each character must be written flawlessly, and must be both neat and pleasing to the eye” (Xu Bing). The written word was not only a part of culture and tradition but also a symbol of power. In Chinese history to show support the Emperor would give a scroll of his calligraphy as a gift and it would be a sacred edict, showing imperial authority (Zheng). As stated earlier the written word was also kept pleasing to the eye. Sherman Lee asserts this idea in A History of Far Eastern Art since “Chinese characters are almost wholly abstract, calligraphy was considered a more creative art than even paintings” (Lee 288).

The written word is elevated in China for its long tradition, aesthetic quality, and ties to Chinese philosophy. From the Confucian cultural viewpoint pursuing elegance is central and a “common way to indicate elegance is to have hangings of calligraphy in one’s studio or living room, an indication of one’s distance from vulgarity and detachment from any political movement” (Zheng). Although this was true of the Confucian standpoint, the style of Chinese calligraphy over the course of history does tend to reflect political or other struggles evident in the country at the time (Figure 3, 4, 5). According to Zheng “The mechanical strokes and dull composition of the Guange style during Qing dynasty showed the rigid political domination period” (Zheng) and when Xu Bing was a child in school the Cultural Revolution of China

emphasized a different form of calligraphy, drastically controlling and censoring China's oldest traditions.

The Cultural Revolution was a political movement that led China away from its strongest traditions even though the leader Mao was claiming to bring Chinese culture to all people, making them equal. It put a halt on the art of calligraphy, works were destroyed, calligraphers were criticized, and only nine works were published between 1966 and 1969 and those were either Mao's work or Lei Feng's diaries (Zheng). These diaries of a supposed soldier of the People's Liberation Army and supporter of Mao were allowed since they were used for propaganda creating example of how young people should behave and who they should support. As for the actual technique of calligraphy Mao emphasized a type that was meant to be read plainly through bold strokes which were easy to reproduce, known as big character posters (fig. 3).

These posters were different from classical calligraphy, since the classical pieces usually aim for self expression and sometimes are not legible except to those with extensive calligraphy training. Similar to historical traditions of passing sacred edicts through the calligraphy of the emperor, Mao revived feudal tradition with the wide acceptance of his inscriptions. The power of the inscriptions was even more powerful because of the convenience of printmaking, making messages available to all corners of the country (Zheng).

During this period of cultural unrest Xu Bing's father was a librarian and his mother worked with books of traditional background as well, they were well versed in Chinese culture before the change of the Revolution. Bing was sent away to school and so he stayed connected to language in some traditional ways. Xu Bing explains:

[I] [g]rew up surrounded by the books from my parents' work [...] once I had learned enough to be able to read whatever to understand them, China had entered the period where people were not allowed the wish to read. When the Cultural Revolution ended, I returned from countryside to city [...] and read all kinds" (Xu Bing).

One can see that through his parents, their books, and simply living during the time of this grim period Xu Bing has a rich background of Chinese tradition and related struggles. He is very aware of the history of his culture which he conveys in his artwork, specifically through his materials and subject matter.

A Book from the Sky conveys a reference to Chinese scrolls and books of traditional forms. These formats were established by 1000 CE and included paintings of large mural decorations and the three portable formats-- hanging scroll, handscroll, and single sheet (Lee 360). One can see as well the emphasis placed on tradition, more specifically arts and calligraphy, because of the strict rules and customs China created for itself such as "Xie He's 6 canons of painting [...which are] first and most importantly, animation through spirit consonance [...]; second structural method in the use of brush; third fidelity to the object in portraying forms; fourth conformity to kind in applying colors; fifth proper planning in the placing of elements; sixth transmission of experience of the past in making copies" (Lee 288). The canons which are closely related to Xu Bing's work are the second and the sixth because of his work being calligraphic. The actual final product was not done with a brush but with woodblock prints but he did use a brush and the calligraphy style to make the characters which were then made into woodblock templates. The sixth canon is portrayed through the appearance of the work as a copy of Chinese traditional language and the mirroring of the culture in general. According to an

article featured on Xu Bing's website "everything about A Book From the Sky has a look of authenticity from its arrangement of heading and marginals on the page to its string bindings and indigo covers, the work mimics in every detail the characteristics of traditional Chinese printing and book-making" (Xu Bing). Even the method of making A Book from the Sky is similar to Chinese painters of the past. For example Stanley Abe states that "Xu Bing himself has likened the laborious process of creating A Book From the Sky to the practice of Zen Buddhism" which relates to the long tradition of the language and the arts reflecting religious or cultural beliefs. As for the actual presentation of his work, it envelopes the viewer with hanging scrolls across the ceiling and many books with many pages of characters. It conveys the elements of traditional formats on a large installation scale.

Although A Book from the Sky contains historical elements of technique and format from Chinese culture, the reality that the characters are made up by the artist and are indeed not legible changes the piece from a historical copy to a kind of critique of language and tradition. Abe claims that this "denial of legibility [...] produced a powerful work that refuses any singular reading" (Abe). The work reflects a point in the history of Chinese culture when only those who were trained properly could read all calligraphy. The importance of the language is conveyed by the format of installation on a large scale surrounding the viewer. The false characters provide a level of unrest, as the work shuns the idea of any meaning coming from the characters themselves. A Book from the Sky portrays the struggle of adapting to Mao's overthrow of tradition during the Cultural Revolution in order to make language uniform and equally accessible through big character propaganda. The work instead presents a language that is equally inaccessible. This point is not as shocking from a Western viewpoint which can appreciate the work as a cultural icon of China and its art in writing without searching for an

understanding. On the other hand, those who do read Chinese and are a part of the culture being represented expect to find meaning in these false characters that give no such answers making A Book from the Sky a frustrating puzzle.

Xu Bing learned the classical techniques of Chinese calligraphy, read all sorts of traditional books because of his parents that had been forbidden in the cultural turmoil of the Revolution and portrays the resulting frustrating lack of dependability on language in his work, as seen in A Book from the Sky. The work draws on the long tradition of Chinese formats as well as the cultural importance of calligraphy as not only a form of communication but art. A Book from the Sky is installed in such a way that engrosses the viewer with the seemingly Chinese characters and presented in two of the three traditional formats, the hanging scroll and the single sheets bound into a book form. On the surface Xu Bing's work seems rooted in tradition with a use of historical formatting techniques. It is however through closer observation and knowledge of the work and Chinese Script that allows the critical meaning of the work to emerge. The Cultural Revolution and Mao's simplification of characters made it all that much harder for Xu's generation to identify with and understand their culture. The idea of the language being simple and available to all with little self-expression contrasts with the tradition passed down by parents and early on in school before the Revolution. For Xu it created "a mistrust of writing and language as a reliable meaning system and canon conferring cultural identity" (Koppel-Yang, 169). With his experience and knowledge Xu pulls at ideas and feelings of modern society to contrast with the historical allusions he makes while deconstructing the functionality of language and leaving viewers questioning the dependability of writing and limits of a cultural perspective.



Figure 1
Xu Bing, A Book from the Sky



Figure 2
Xu Bing, A Book from the Sky (detail)



Figure 3
Song Dynasty 960-1127

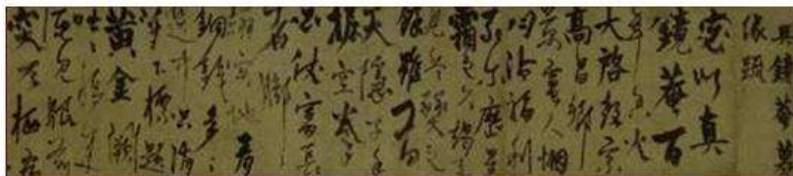


Figure 4
Yuan Dynasty 1271-1368



Figure 5
Qing Dynasty 1644-1911

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Author:

Karen Obermeyer-Kolb was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her family moved to Minnesota a year later and Karen grew up in Saint Paul. Her love of art and academics from a young age led to a quick decision of Art History as a main course of study, freshman year at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Karen received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History and French with a minor in Studio Art Spring of 2011. Academically, Karen would like to pursue graduate studies in Art History, but before returning to school she will be taking time off to gain work experience. Since graduation, she has been doing an exhibition internship at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, where she oversees maintenance of three exhibition spaces, helps with installation and deinstallation, and volunteers for special events hosted by the Book Arts. In the fall, Karen will begin a research internship at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which will further prepare her for a future career as a museum professional.

Faculty mentor:

Alisa Eimen is an associate professor in the Art Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where she has taught Art History courses since 2005. She received her BA from the University of Alabama, Birmingham and her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in 2006. Dr. Eimen has published articles on 20th-century Iranian art and an article on a 19th-century South Asian arts patron is forthcoming. She is particularly interested in the ways artists navigate binaries, such as modern/tradition, East/West, and public/private.