NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
FINE ART PAINTING

XU BING'S *TIANSHU* AS *A BOOK FROM THE SKY* *MIRROR FOR ANALYZING THE WORLD*

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Grateful thanks to Sue Mac Nab for aiding the preparation of this thesis.

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List of Radicals, p. 3, 1986.

*English title for *Tianshu*

LIST OF CHINESE WORDS

Běijīng	Capital of the People's Republic of China, often written as Peking	北京
Dào	"The Way," Road	道
gǎnjué	Sensitivity	感觉
gōngyòng diànhuà	Public Telephone	公用电话
gōngyù jièlái tāshān zhìshí	Smash the Jade with a Piece of Rock from another Mountain	攻玉界来他山掷石
Hànzì	Chinese Characters	汉字
lí	Multitude	黎
KěkǒuKělè	Coca~Cola	可口可乐
mǔ	Measurement of Land (1 *mu* = 1/6 of an acre)	亩

niúshǐ gēda	Useless Turds	牛屎疙瘩
shūfǎ	Chinese Calligraphy	书法
Tiānshū	Mandarin Title for *A Book from the Sky, Mirror for Analysing the World*	天书
Tiānānmén	Famous Square in the Center of Beijing (Heaven's Peaceful Gate)	天安门
xī	West	西
xiǎo pǐndiàn	Small Shop	小品店
xīncháo měishù	Contemporary Art	心潮美术
Zhōngguó	China (Middle Kingdom)	中国

Zhòngwén Chinese Language

zìqī qīrén Deceive Oneself While Deceiving Others

Introduction

If you have perceived the image, forget the meaning. If it makes sense forget the words. (Dreissen and Browner (Eds.), 1997, p.11)

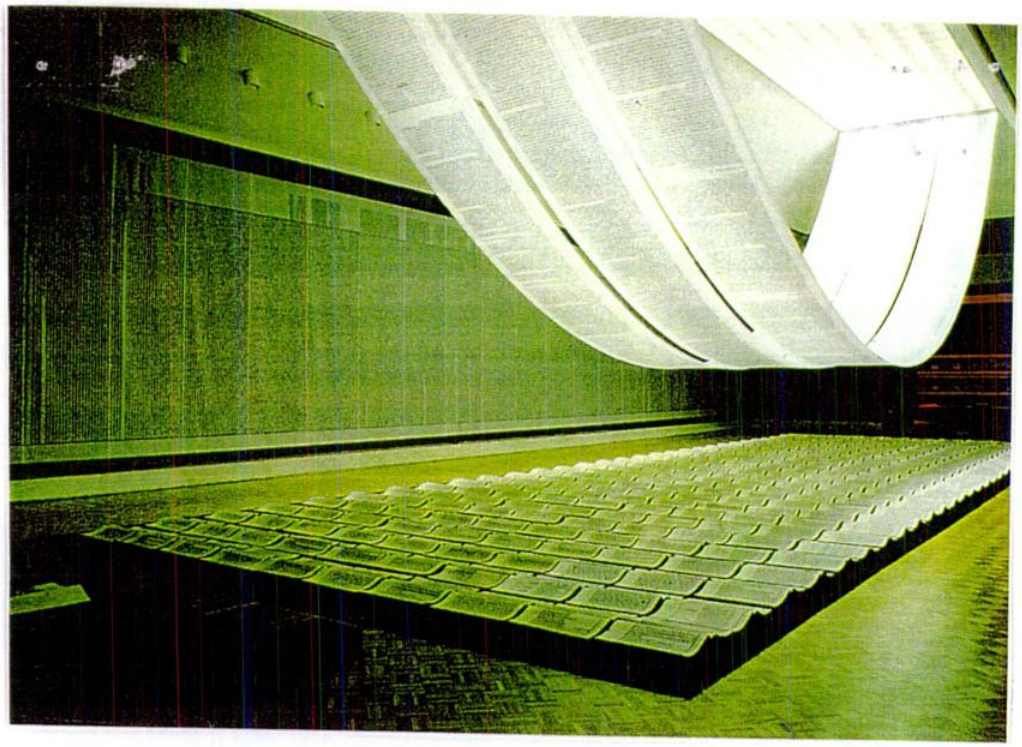


Plate 1, Xu Bing, *Tianshu*

It is difficult to explain what drew me to *Tianshu*, because my initial encounter with it left me with feelings of boredom and puzzlement. I couldn't understand why a person would dedicate three years wasting so much energy to produce

what seemed to be a repetitious nothing. I was annoyed at my inability to read the text and even more so when I found that I had wasted my concentration in attempting to. To sum up my initial reaction, I felt that *Tianshu* was almost like a trick masterminded by someone with nothing better to.

In reconsidering these feelings of puzzlement and what can only be described as frustrated concentration, I realized that they reminded me of how I first felt upon moving from the United States to Taipei, Taiwan (Republic of China). I remember walking down the streets feeling so estranged by the unfamiliar smells and noises; the unusual insects and odd sounding car horns. I also remember feeling very physically out of place. I recognized the music of the Chinese language, but I couldn't translate what I was hearing. I was familiar with the aesthetics of what Chinese characters looked like, but I couldn't translate the "choppy pictures" above shops and on newspapers into words. It was like I was in a glass box able to see but unable to participate in what was going on around me.

I slowly learned that this experience was not exclusive to me. I,

like many other expatriates living in Asia, was part of a fast growing link, making the world a smaller place sharing both industrially and culturally what one culture had to offer with another. In my situation it was an Eastern/ Western exchange. The following Plates provide examples of Eastern/ Western exchanges currently in operation.

Plate 2 is an example of an advertisement taken from 1997 Beijing Scene Guidebook for foreigners living in Beijing. The ChinaNet Info. Tech Co., Ltd. provides customers with English speaking staff aiding internet exchange.

Plate 2, China Net Info Tech Co. , Ltd, 1997 Beijing Scene Guidebook.

Plate 3 is a cartoon of four older Chinese men playing *gou,* Chinese chess. While caught up in this traditional game on their make-shift rickety table, they seem oblivious to the fast economic growth and foreign industry sweeping their Beijing city street surroundings. (The background displays street signs advertising "*Kěkǒu Kělè*" [Coca~Cola], public telephone services [*gōngyòng diànhuà*], and small independent shops [*xiǎopǐngdiàn*].)

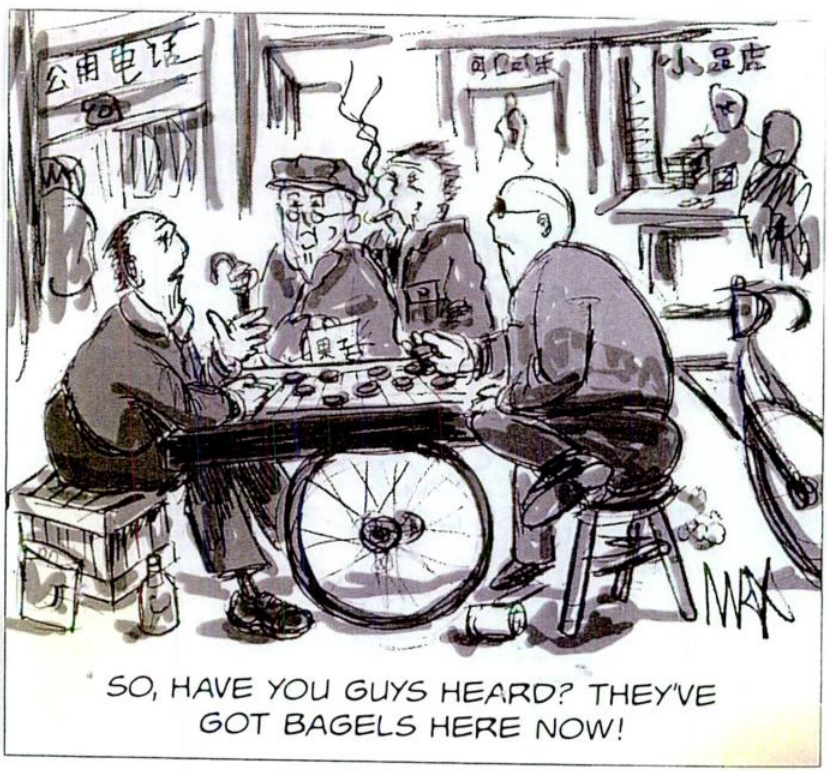


Plate 3," *So, have you guys heard? They've got bagels here now!*", 1997 Beijing Scene Guidebook.

Finally, the single line of dialogue provides evidence that these oldtimers more up to date than they appear. In contrast to what one might expect of their generation, they are both accepting and evolving with the current trends of the times.

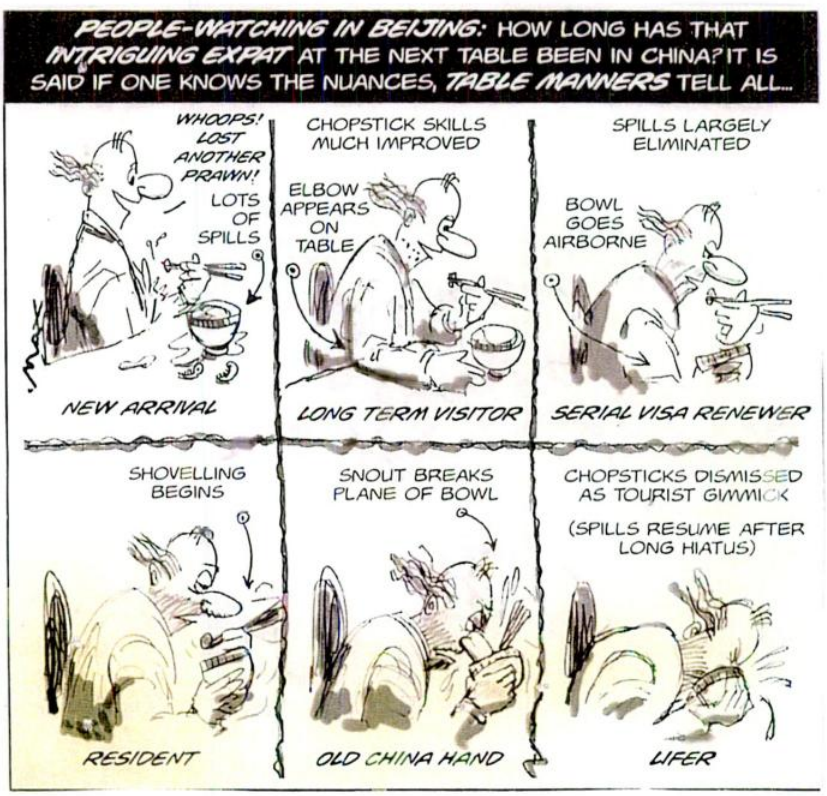


Plate 4, *People Watching in Beijing*, 1997 Beijing Scene Guidebook

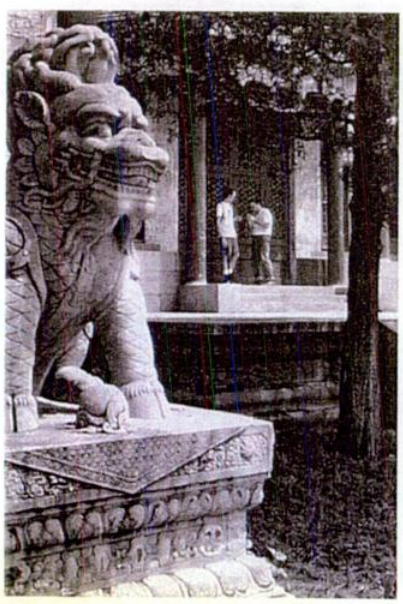
After studying in greater depth the work of Xu Bing, I began to feel an empathy combined with much stronger appreciation for his work. This was partially due to my own experiences in a Chinese culture. Just as I, as a Westerner had dealt with Eastern culture, Xu Bing was dealing with a foreign culture. Xu was dealing with Western culture through Eastern perspective. Plate 4 is another cartoon, this time showing different stages in a Westerner's adaptation to Chinese culture through the simple process of eating.

Many Easterners are in a situation similar to Xu's. Some have fled the return of Hong Kong to China. Others are studying in foreign universities or teaching using their language skills. (see Plate 5) There are also those who are selling foreign technology to Western markets. What they all have in common is that they are part of the creation of a bridge. This bridge is filling the cultural gap that separates the East from the West. Xu's part in this stems from his experience living in North America as a Chinese artist where he both gleans from and contributes to the culture.

minibuses for student pick-up and drop-off. The school currently offers kindergarten through sixth grade classes, with plans to expand one grade per year. Classes are taught in English with daily instruction in Mandarin. ESL and CSL (Chinese as a Second Language) programs are also offered. Chinese and English instructors team-teach classes. The school will move to a new location in the Beijing Economic and Technological Development Zone within the next two years.

CHINESE UNIVERSITIES OFFERING COURSES FOR FOREIGNERS

Beijing Broadcasting Institute
北京广播学院
1 Dingfuzhuang Donglu, Chaoyang District
定福庄东街1号
Tel: 6576-2955 x 359; Fax: 6576-2817



Beijing Dance Academy 北京舞蹈学院
19 Minyuan Nanlu, Haidian District
海淀区民院南路19号
Tel: 6841-4443 x 3014; Fax: 6841-1605

Beijing Fashion University 北京服装大学
12 Heping Beijie, Chaoyang District
朝阳区和平北街12号
Tel: 6428-8257; Fax: 6421-0950

Beijing Film Academy 北京电影学院
4 Xicheng Lu, Haidian District 海淀区西城路4号
Tel: 6201-8899 x 560; Fax: 6201-2132

Beijing Foreign Affairs Institute
北京外交学院
24 Zhanlanguan Lu, Haidian District
海淀区展览馆路24号
Tel: 6832-3310, 6832-3348; Fax: 6433-8664

Beijing Foreign Language University
北京外国语大学
2 Xisanhuan Beilu, Haidian District
海淀区西三环北路2号
Tel: 6842-2271; Fax: 6842-2587

Beijing Institute of Business 北京商学院
33 Fuchengmen Lu, Xicheng District
西城区阜成门路33号
Tel: 6890-4774; Fax: 6841-7833

Beijing Language and Culture Institute
北京语言学院
15 Xueyuan Lu, Haidian District
海淀区学院路15号
Tel: 6205-1463; Fax: 6205-1461

Beijing Medical University
北京医科大学
38 Xueyuan Lu, Haidian District
海淀区学院路38号
Tel: 6209-1253; Fax: 6201-5681

Beijing Normal University 北京师范大学
19 Xinjiekou Dajie, Haidian District
海淀区新街口大街19号

Plate 5, *Chinese Universities Offering Courses for Foreigners*, 1997 Beijing Scene Guidebook.

Plate 6, the last example of Western influence/ international awareness in China, is an advertisement for Holiday Inn Hotel. The Beijing Holiday Inn, the Lido, offers a wide range of international services listed in the advertisement.

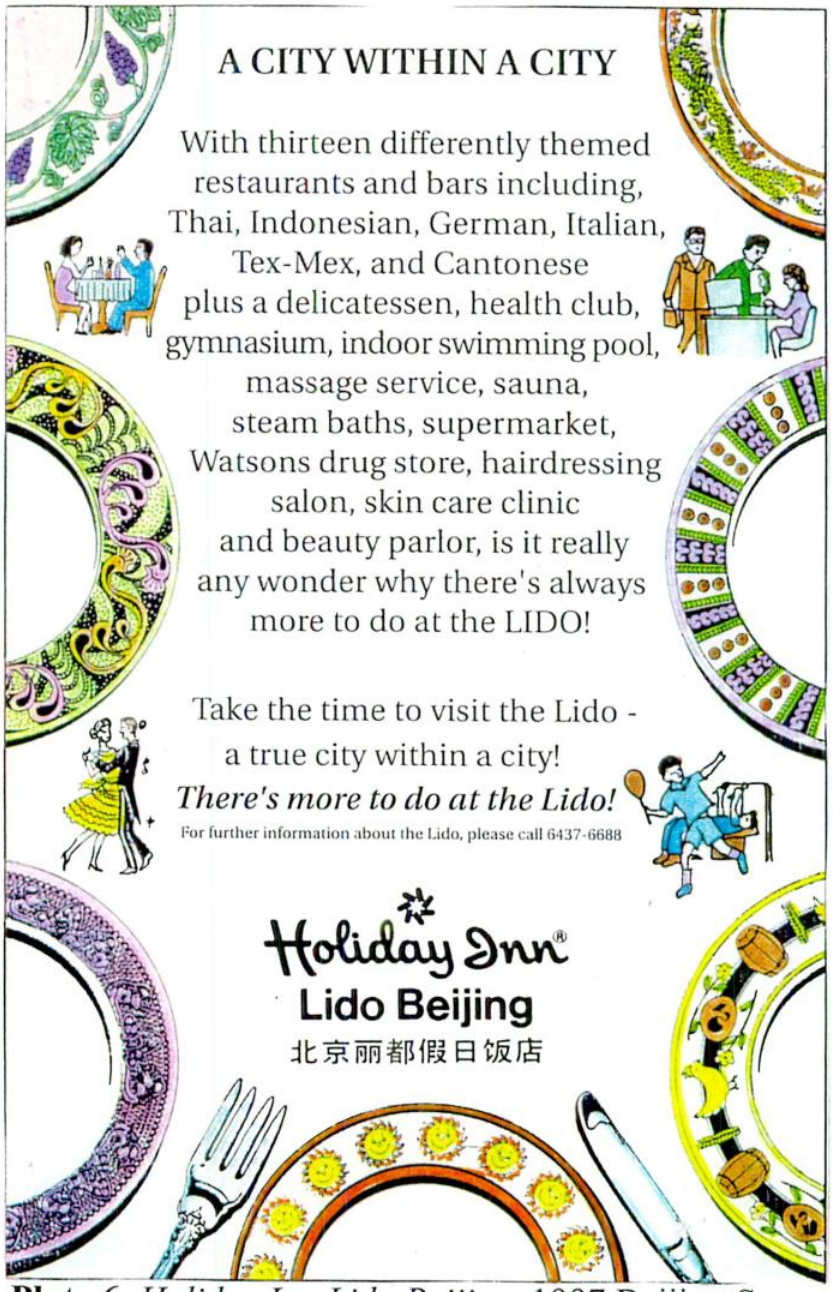


Plate 6, *Holiday Inn Lido Beijing*, 1997 Beijing Scene Guidebook.

The strength of Xu's work lies in its ability to actually eliminate many of these cultural barriers. In the case of *Tianshu*, the language written on the text becomes irrelevant. Everyone experiences *Tianshu* with the same ability or inability to understand it.

In mentally returning to my own experience in Taiwan, I could relate to *Tianshu.* I eventually got over the initial culture shock where I felt completely lacking in communication skills of any kind. I learned to depend on my senses, my experiences and my observations to become an active participant in my new environment. I realized that spoken and written language were not as essential as I thought. More sensory related clues provide the same, and often more information. Strangely enough, this is when I began to learn Chinese.

When looking at *Tianshu*, it would be one's initial assumption that it is written in Chinese and therefore solely for Chinese reading and speaking people. The irony of the situation is that Chinese readers have as much or as little understanding of

Tianshu as those who are unable to read Chinese. Therefore, in retrospect, one must consider *Tianshu* to be an international work of art.

Xu's desire for his artwork to appeal to worldly audiences becomes apparent in the English title that he has chosen. The installation is not *A Book from the Sky: Mirror for Analyzing China,* but instead, *Book from the Sky: Mirror for Analyzing the World.* China may fall under the category of "World," but "World" constitutes far more than just China.[1] Even though *Tianshu* is a Mandarin name, *Tianshu's* English translation makes no reference to China. *Tianshu* directly translates as *Skybook.* Therefore this essay will look at *Tianshu* as the mirror made reference to in the title, indiscriminant in its willingness to reflect people from all walks of life. Three perspectives have been chosen by which to examine *Tianshu.* They include an international perspective, a religious perspective and a purely Chinese perspective.

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[1] The Mandarin name for China is Zhòngguó, meaning middle kingdom/country. For many centuries, Chinese considered China to be the center of the world. The sheer geography of China, either water, mountains or desert surrounding all side, made venturing out of China virtually impossible.

Chapter One:
Tianshu and Contemporary Chinese Art

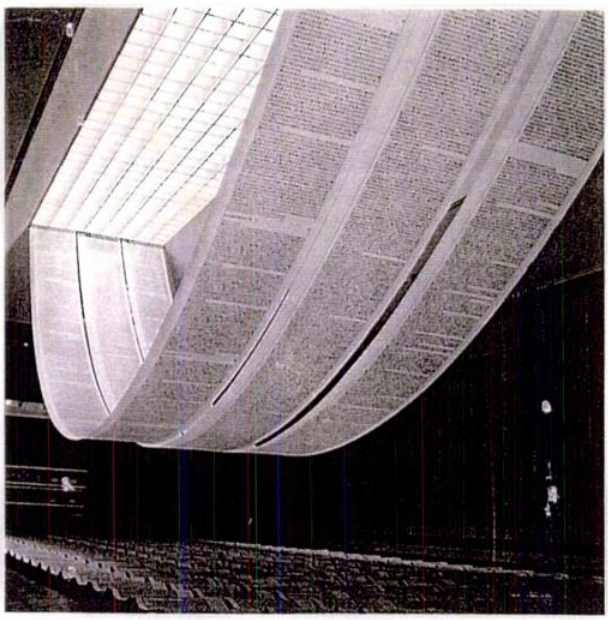

Plate 7, XuBing, *Tianshu.*

For the first time ever, in October 1988, the National Gallery in Beijing, presented *Tianshu,* by Mainland Chinese artist Xu Bing. Now known to the Western public as *Book from the Sky, Mirror for Analyzing the World*, this massive display, consisting of three forms of traditional Chinese text presentation, took up an entire

installation space. To begin with, several hundred volumes of intricately hand-bound books were spread across the floor space. Above this arrangement, hung enormous Sutra scrolls sweeping from one side of the ceiling to the other. Finally, not an inch of wall space was left exposed by wall texts surrounding this central arrangement, in a shrine-like environment.

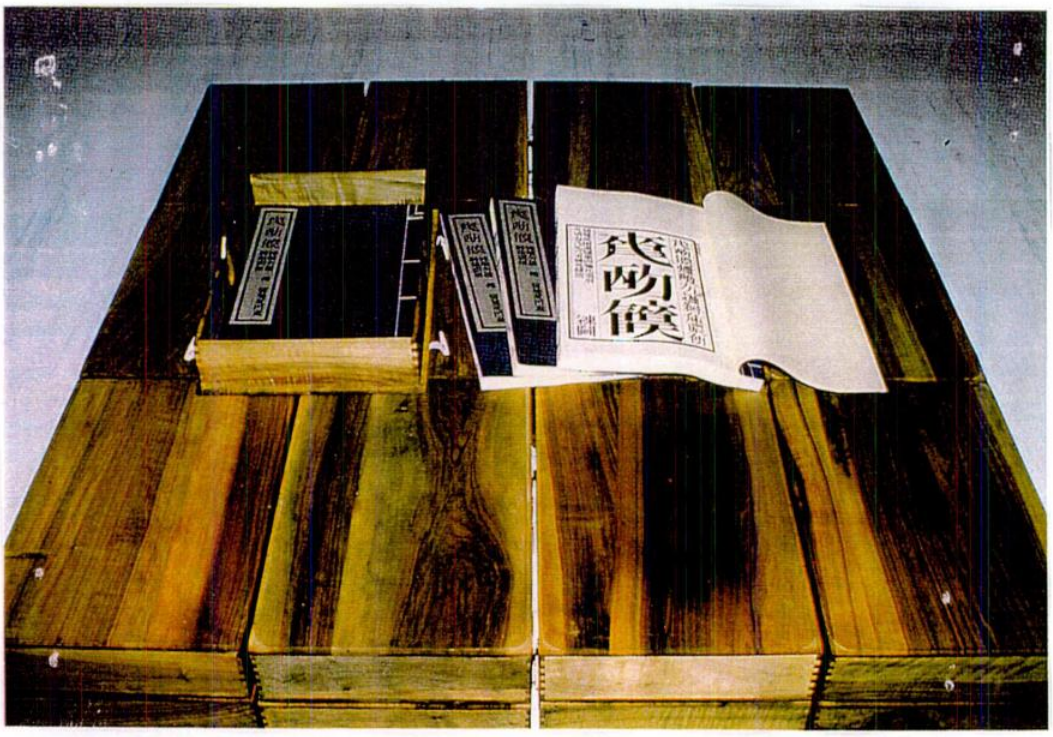

Plate 8, Xu Bing, *Tianshu.*

Each volume of book was printed on folded sheets of hand made *zangjing* paper. *Zangjing* was ideally intended for use in the print of Buddhist writings and teachings. The style of these books is highly practical, more for durability than for aesthetics, but clearly of the most superior quality. The volumes were bound together in a six-hole pattern reserved for the most prestigious books. Each of the corners was carefully covered in the *baojiao* method in which sheets are centrally folded and spine bound.

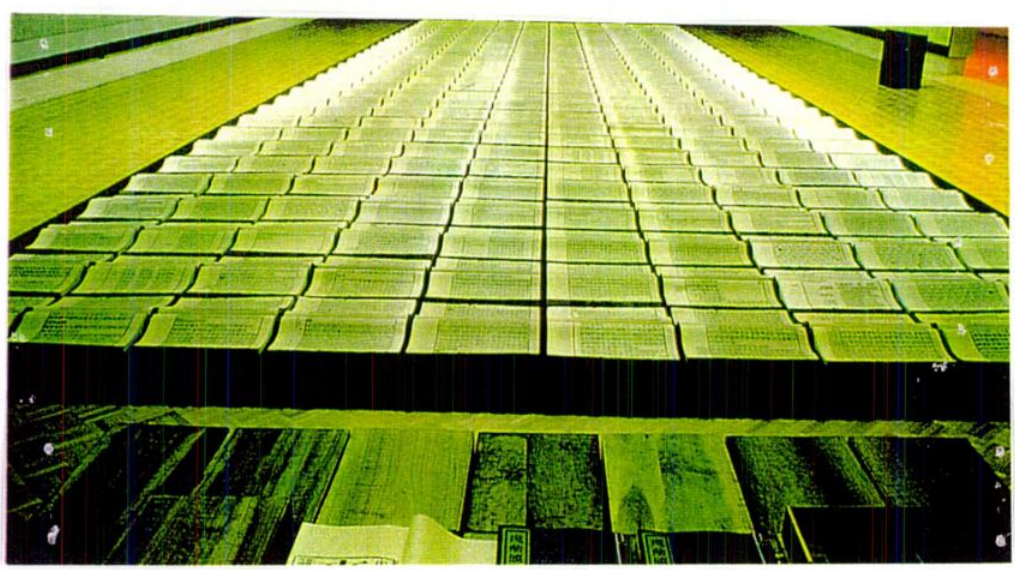

Plate 9, Xu Bing, *Tianshu.*

The average viewer, whether able to read Chinese or not, probably took these texts' legibility for granted. In more carefully examining the script however, the Chinese reader may have become slightly confused, perhaps to the point of questioning his/her own knowledge. This is because every book, Sutra scroll and wall text was actually one hundred percent illegible. As a result, *Tianshu* was left so open ended that as it spread across gallery floors, ceilings, walls, and central spaces it also covered an infinite numbers of issues, still leaving room for yet the same number of interpretations. In essence, everyone can read the "meaningless" books, wall texts, and sutra scrolls that cannot be read by anyone, at the same time.

Xu Bing explained to World Art magazine:

> "While making *Tianshu,* I enjoyed my work, even though I had no idea what I was expressing. Reaction was complex- many people liked the piece because it suggested tradition. All I wanted was to bring up some basic questions and let the others decide what the piece meant." (World Art Magazine, Feb 1998, p. 120.)

Many critics have limited interpretations of *Tianshu* as responses to the troubled undefined state of Chinese culture resulting from the unstable state of the political climate in twentieth century

China. Given Xu's personal history in combination with the fact that most of "China's avant-garde art is inspired and driven by the desire to issue cultural criticism, [though it may not] expect its own evaluation to be based on the actual effectiveness of the technique," reading *Tianshu* in this way is quite appropriate. (Tsong-zung, 1993, p. 41)

ArtNews magazine explains that Xu is "familiar with the absurdity of political excess." Xu was born in 1955, in Chungqing, into a professionally successful family. As Xu's father and mother both worked in China's top third level institution, Beijing University, his father an administrator and his mother a secretary, it was unavoidable that his family suffer during the Cultural Revolution's intellectual repression.

Sure enough, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1974, Xu was sent to the harsh Chinese countryside into exile. World Art magazine lightly labeled his experience as a "reeducation process." Ironically, similar situations described by others have sounded more like slave labor camp experiences. (ARTNews, September 1994, p.100)

A potion of a chapter taken from Jung Chang's Wild Swans, entitled *Thought Reform Through Labor,* has been selected to describe the severity of such camps that were considered rather normal in Cultural Revolutionary China. (Appendix 1)

Xu's career was, again, hindered, years later, after 1989's crushing Tiananmen Square incident. 1989, also, marked the opening of the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition. This was the first "unofficial art" exhibition granted permission to display in China. The show, shut down within hours of the opening, ended chaotically after artist, Xiao Lu, fired a bullet into her work proclaiming it "dead."

"Unofficial" artists lost the right to exhibit for almost two years following the incident, and from then on, tight restrictions were issued on any work selected for exhibition purposes. The elite venue, China Art Gallery, was also forced to suspend top gallery officials for three months, not to mention the enormous fines they were charged for allowing such an esteemed event to go out of control.

Stifling Chinese visual arts during this time period was the Chinese government's way of preventing the reoccurrence of incidents, such as the one taking place at the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition. Visual Art in China magazine, in existence since the *'85 New Wave Movement* (a phase after Deng Xiao Ping's Open Door Policy when western avant-garde vocabulary was in experimentation), was banned following student demonstrations and the *China Avant-Garde* exhibition.

Another strong contribution to the Chinese artistic repression during this time was the fact that Xu and many other top talents emigrated to Western countries. As a result, a division occurred in Chinese contemporary art consisting of artists residing in China on one side and those who had become expatriates on the other.

After emigrating, Xu has had incredible international success. Up to this point, *Tianshu* has traveled to galleries around the globe including the Elvehjem Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, the Randolph Street Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Massachusetts College of Art Museum, the Art Beatus and Annie Wang Art

Foundation in Vancouver, the Boston Museum of Fine Art, the Asia Society' Park Avenue Gallery, various museums in Copenhagen and Munich, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (January, 1998). It is in these foreign venues that spectators, critics, and even Xu Bing himself has had the liberty of absorbing and reflecting on the impact of *Tianshu*.

As well as experiencing success in foreign countries, Xu has managed to maintain relations with Chinese artists at home. Though, most Chinese artists residing in foreign countries, were excluded from the *China New Art – Post 1989* exhibition, Xu was invited to participate. Though taking place in Hong Kong, this spectacular 1993 event was the first reappearance of Chinese avant-garde art since the disastrous *China/ Avant-garde* exhibition and the Tiananmen incident. Xu was asked to contribute as his "works [had] an important bearing on the [current] creative scene in China." (Tsong-zung, 1993, 2)

Xu and a few others having fled China took on roles as international correspondents. As well as dealing with new and

different international criteria, their work also maintained positions in the art scenes at home. This required that they keep their labels as Chinese artists while avoiding that this element dominate their work entirely.

In creating art that effectively introduced Chinese culture to international audiences, many of these artists had to communicate through Western contemporary vocabulary (video/ installation/ performance). These new and foreign languages have since been experimented with by Chinese artists on the home front.

> "In general[Chinese contemporary art] uses a 'Western' vocabulary; video, performance, installation painting, where necessary. It is precisely these contemporary media that enable the artist to preserve their own language and the Western public to penetrate to the meaning of the works." (Browner and Dreissen (Eds.), 1996, 1)

This requires further examination into the effectiveness with which Xu Bing has used contemporary means of expression while preserving the language of Chinese traditional art. Both Xu's international awareness in combination with his ability to feed traditional subject matter to a modern day public will be observed.

In the short essay entitled "Why Asia?", Alice Yang addresses the possibility of a global culture. Through specific observation of Chinese artists residing in the United States, she examines the difficulties they have maintaining their sense of Chineseness when presenting contemporary art to the American public. (Appendix 2)

According to Xu's beliefs:

> "Culture is nothing but a game, a game that people have been playing for thousands of years. The game has left the human race in a state of exhaustion. In general, people need little more than a simple pattern or set of concrete results to fulfill their conception of civilization. Culture is certainly a good thing, but it is deceptive." (Tsong-zung, 1993, 58)

This statement reflects Xu's interpretation of culture as learned, though not entirely necessary. Culture serves as a tool in the game of communication. Resulting from developed behavioral patterns that unite people of the same race, culture can, unfortunately, create barricades between people of different races. Cultures have interesting differentiating characteristics, but when misinterpreted can cause great misunderstanding. In surprising

Chinese reading audiences with what initially appeared to be Chinese, Xu forced them to question their routine patterns of thinking.

In a project succeeding *Tianshu*, people were made to become aware of how lazy and easily manipulated their minds become when relying on one set of given rules or format. Once again, Xu used the common tool of language in this ingenious demonstration.

His, 1994, *Square Words*, expanded on the ideas behind the meaningless characters of *Tianshu*. This time however, Xu was catering to specifically Western viewers.

Plate 10, Xu Bing, *Square Words*.

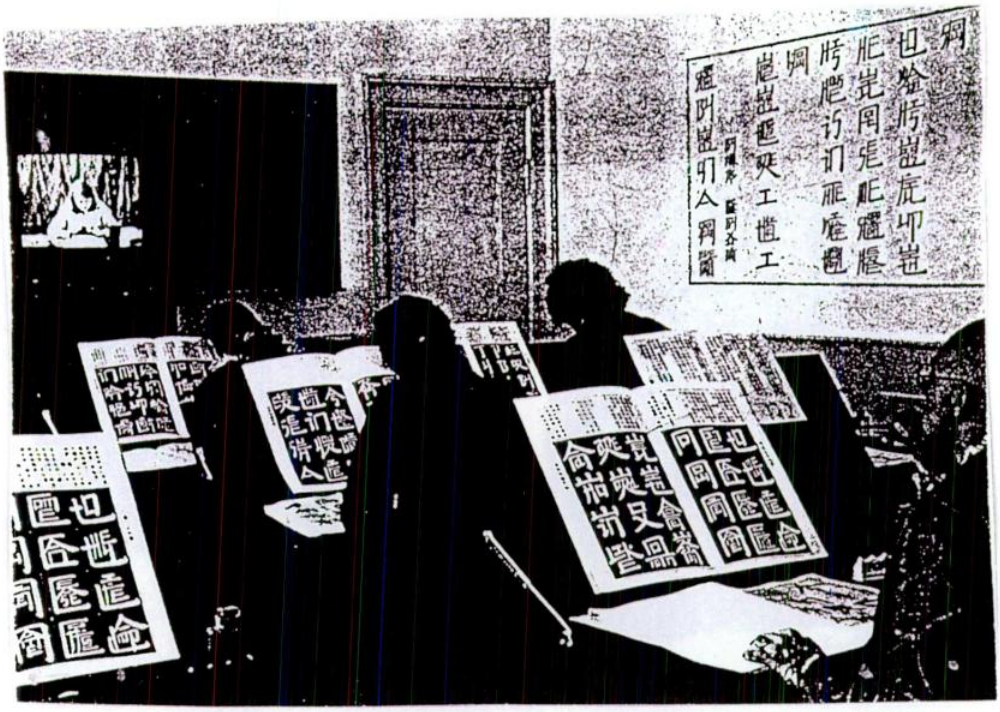

Plate 11, Xu Bing, *Square Words*.

Xu created two large format textbooks on Chinese *shūfǎ* (calligraphy), one with essential strokes needed in order to paint characters and the second with a selection of his self-created Chinese characters. As this exhibition was held in a variety of

Western cities and was intended for Western participants, the beginners started with brush strokes in order to develop *gǎnjué* (sensitivity/ feeling) for the characters they would be writing.

Xu set up a classroom situation and placed textbooks on each desk. At the front of the room was a television set with a tape playing of an instructor giving English directions on correct technique for Chinese calligraphy. The participants were given a time period in which they could practice writing the characters. At the end of the tape, much to their surprise, they discovered that Xu's characters were actually English words written to appear like Chinese characters. Xu Bing says:

> "*Square Words* is an attempt to have people consider the difference in language and culture. I want them to change their patterns of thought through my oddly constructed 'English' words. In that sense, *Square Words* looks back to *Tianshu*. The piece attempts to break completely with linguistic tradition and asks the viewers or participants to open their minds to new ideas. Usually people are lazy about the way they think. With Square Words, I want the audience to collide with conceptual boundaries and reshape habitual modes of considering. People need to have their routine thinking attacked in this way."(World Art Magazine, Feb 1998, 120)

Plate 12, Xu Bing, *Square Words.*

Square Words and *Tianshu's* dependency on subjectivity explains the title's later reference to the mirror. *Tianshu* relies on the viewer's perceptions/ deceptions in order to classify the text as Chinese characters, providing further necessity for a variety of interpretations as opposed to ones that are purely Chinese based.

Because *Tianshu* exists as Chinese text only if the subject assumes that it is, in reality, the language printed on *Tianshu's* books,

scrolls, and wall texts is a language entirely independent of Chinese. It appears like Chinese, receiving all aspects positive and negative going along with being Chinese, but it is only Chinese in the minds of those who allow it to be.

Strong visual associations with Chinese, the traditional Chinese format in which *Tianshu* is presented and the use of contemporary vocabulary (installation) make Xu's language an almost modern day Chinese language. Joining Chinese tradition with what is modern-day, links the East with the West. Chinese and non-Chinese readers inability to read Xu's work also breaks down cultural barriers between these two hemispheres.

Apart from obvious symbolism in forms of various traditional text presentation, everyone's eyes read *Tianshu* in the same way. *Tianshu* is a classic example of what the *Back-to-the-Roots/ Purified Language* movement described as using "Western art to revitalize Chinese art" and using "the ancient to transform the modern."

> "From the turn of the century, China's major artists have emerged from the theoretical battles only to divide themselves into several antagonistic and yet mutually influential camps: strictly "Chinese painters" and "Western painters" on the one hand, and painters" who attempted an integration by "using the ancient to transform the modern" and "using Western art to revitalize Chinese art" on the other." (Tsong-zung, 1993, 34)

The *Back-to-the-Roots/ Purified Language* movement preceded the Tiananmen Square incident, lasting from 1987 to 1989. This period was a reaction against, or a reconsideration of, the *'85 New Wave* movement. It was a time in which artists "hungrily absorbed and made use of Western Dada, Surrealism, Pop and Conceptual art – the entire range of the Western avant-garde vocabulary." (Tsong-zung, 1993, p. 17)

According to Chang Tsong-zung in New China Art – Post 1989, the *'85 New Wave Movement* attempted "to smash the jade with a piece of rock from another mountain" (*gongyu jielaide tashan zhishi*). (Tsong-zung, 1993, p. 17). Western/ avant-garde art was used to rebel against the previous generations. After thirty years of segregation from the rest of the world,

under Communism, China was suddenly allowed to taste Western influences.

This particular passage describes responses to Western influences in music:

> "As Deng's "open door" exposed the country to more and more outside influences in the mid-eighties,pop culture established its first beachhead. For Chinese youths such music provided a welcome escape from the dreariness of their lives and a way to vicariously brush against a Western cultural world that represented freedom, wealth, style, sex, fun, and glamour. This tendency to believe that "the moon was rounder abroad than in China" infuriated many old revolutionaries. So when pop music made an unexpected U-turn and began embracing old revolutionary standards, many of them were at first relieved and gratified." (Schell, 1994, 286)

As the *'85 New Wave* movement satisfied people's curiosity and hunger for the world outside China, the *Back-to-the-Roots* movement satisfied their psychological loss experience by the onslaught of Western Modernism. The *Back-to-the-Roots* movement encouraged work from a traditional Chinese aesthetic through the application of elements of classical Daoism and Zen philosophy and Eastern mysticism. The movement branched into two groups:

purely Chinese painters and painters using the ancient to transform the modern, usually through the use of Western art transforming Chinese art.

The strictly Chinese painters were known as the *New Literati* painters. Their work returned to classical Chinese painting's "spirit of idle play" as a reaction against the heavy critical tone of the *'85 New Wave* painters. Their popularity was very short-lived however, as their desire for aesthetic superiority took precedence over their interest in dealing with the reality of current situations.

New Literati painters were reliving the past to the extent of borrowing the trade marks, energy, and eccentricities of classical artists. The final result was purely commercial and did nothing for the development of Chinese Contemporary art.

Xu Bing took the *Purified language* movement a step further. Instead of altering the meanings of characters, Xu cut words off from their meanings entirely, an example of language purified to the highest possible degree. In abstracting characters into symbols and opening his work to a variety of audiences, Xu

internationalized Chinese cultural symbols.

Both the *Back-to-the-Roots* movement and the *'85 New Wave* movement shared a common need to rebel against the regimental discipline oriented side of Chinese Culture. Where the *'85 New Wave* movement looked outside China to the free state of art in Western countries, the *Back-to-the-Roots* movement returned to the philosophical mentality of Daoist and Zen artists before restriction to Socialist Realism and Woodcuts.

Under the influences of Daoism, *Tianshu* successfully vented Chinese regimentation through Western vocabulary. The three components existing simultaneously capture the reality of modern-day Chinese culture: what is traditionally Chinese influenced by what is modern day.

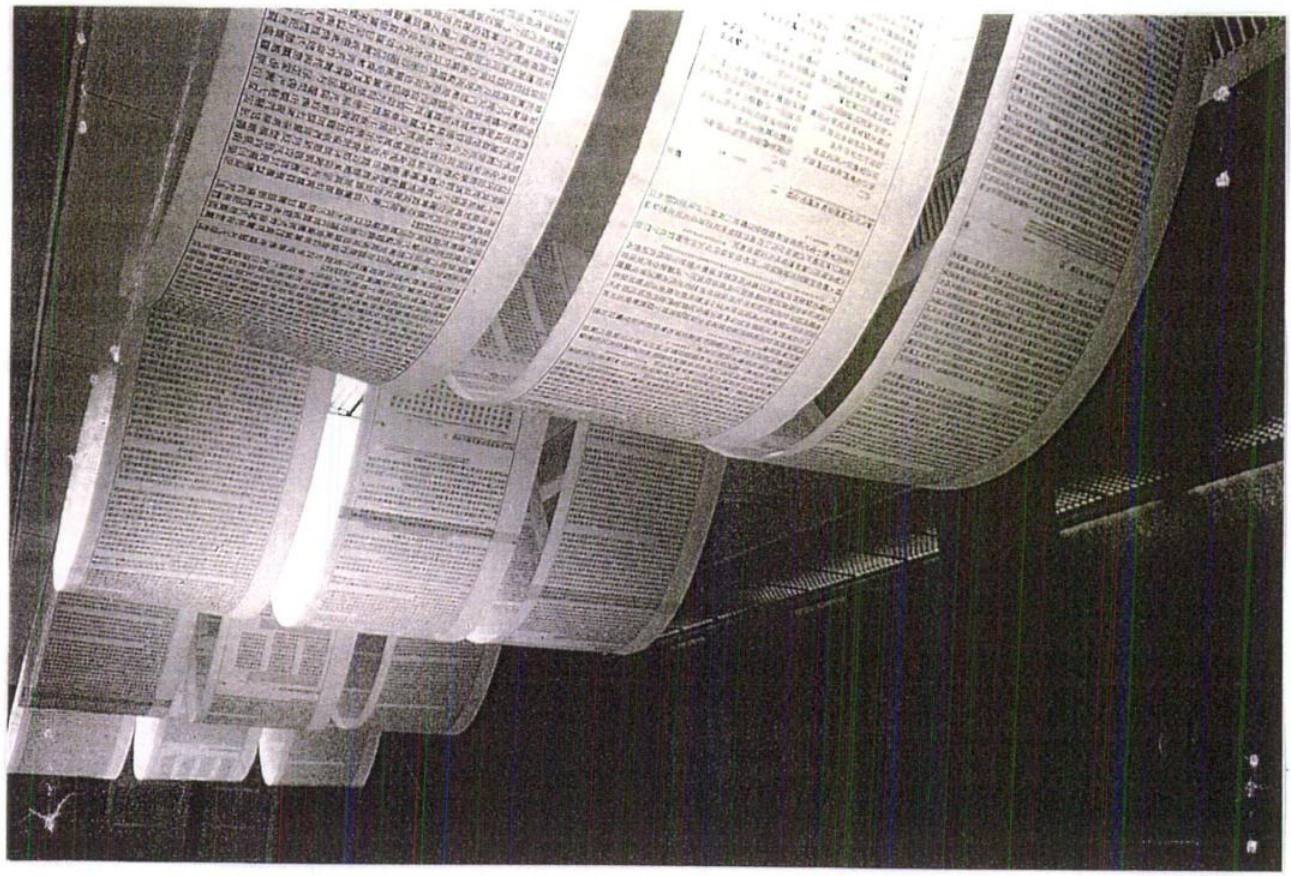

Plate 13, Xu Bing, *Tianshu*

Daoist Influences in *Tianshu*

> "Art certainly does not aim to destroy 'laws,' it is merely a path towards nature. According to the Chinese outlook, the essence of the world consists of a process of changes that occur in random order. All the same, the unification of humankind and nature does not always take place in peaceful harmony. It is up to us humans to become part of the process of natural transformation by our behavior. This is why we have to cut our ties with 'artificialities' to return to the natural state, to experience nature with a free spirit and to change with nature. Under certain circumstances, change resulting from such a spiritual process could lead to a fundamental break with one's culture and society." (Dreissen (Eds.), 1997, p. 12)

At this point religion and spirituality will be observed as influential elements of *Tianshu. Daoist* influences become apparent from one's initial visual encounter with *Tianshu.* Not only does *Tianshu* take on a Biblical/ Covenant type of aura, accepting the responsibility of speaking to the world, its layout resembles a peaceful shrine of billowing Sutra scrolls.

Sutra scrolls contain documentation of ancient Buddhist teachings recorded after Buddha's death to preserve them for generations to come. Many of these Sutras, said to contain the actual words of Buddha, are currently in hiding. They are to be found

when Buddha intends. 600 are in existence today. They are both rare in number and sacred in that they preserve the words of Buddha as well as magical powers.

When discussing their role in *Tianshu*, it is possible that absent and nonsensical documentation of Buddhist teachings makes reference to Chinese Communists' discouragement of Buddhist practices. Perhaps the characters of Xu's Sutras may represent unspoken words of repressed Tibetan people following China's 1950 invasion of Tibet. During this time, thousands of Tibetans were killed off while forcing many others to flee across the Himalayas into India.

On the other hand, Xu possibly avoided binding Buddhist doctrines to words in order to make a statement about the Daoist mentality that believes that true knowledge comes through experience rather than words.

Like many Chinese artists, working under the influence of Daoist and Zen philosophy provided escape for Xu. This type of art both linked artists to their rich Chinese heritage while creating a

neutral ground free of political accusation. As art of this type was created on the basis of laws in tune with humanity and all forces of nature working together, Western influences were also acceptable. The passage introducing this section illustrating Daoist philosophies popular amongst many artists of Xu's time, explains that opening one's self to natural transformation "could lead to a fundamental break with one's culture and society."

Daoist teachings generally encouraged free spirit and natural order as opposed to man-made law. One's destiny and uncontrolled natural state takes precedence over one that was forced or pushed into alignment. "The law that there is no law is the ultimate law." (Dreiesen, 1997, p. 12)

It was not surprising artists, such as Xu Bing, familiar with artistic repression, would be drawn toward an unrestricted state of creation. Daoism's influence on Xu's work, allowed him to free himself of his regimental existence by spending endless hours continuously reproducing printed images of his ideographs.

> "Xu spent months meticulously carving woodblock ideographs that superficially looked like Chinese characters, but which on closer inspection proved to be nonsensical. Using radicals of Chinese characters as his basic unit of form, Xu made monumental sized scrolls and executed on their surface a number of prints and structures. He then hung the scrolls according to the conditions of the specific exhibition venue, constructing a carefully determined space. Through the ceaseless and meticulous repetition involved in executing this major piece of work, Xu succeeded in creating a kind of neo-Zen atmosphere." (Tsong-zung, 1993, 18)

Wall texts reminiscent of propaganda posters, official looking bound textbooks and Sutra scroll-like banners, were Xu's chosen series of informative texts. By avoiding binding these texts to definite meanings, similar to the Daoist belief that the existence of no law is the ultimate law, Xu created complete freedom of interpretation.

> "The Daoist thinking, which has had a tremendous impact on traditional Chinese art, is consistently marked by the view that true art is created beyond the limitations of what can be described with words. Thus, the description that can be strung together with words serve as much the same function a jacket does: it can be put on or taken off, Words, in themselves, have no absolute value."(Dreissen, 1997, p. 13)

Xu told the September 1998, edition of ARTNews that true knowledge does not come through words but through experience. In eliminating mental exercises, such as processing language, Xu forced spectators to use their senses to experience *Tianshu*. In understanding Daoist philosophy's influences on *Tianshu*, it is necessary to delve deeper into the backround of Daoism.

This "way of life," as it is commonly termed, formed in pre-Communist China, after the Han Dynasty. There is no central God-like figure creating rules governing one's life. In contrast, followers of the Dao are expected to tune themselves into the ways of nature. Daoists search for the balance between their inner self and the outer world. Achieving this, one hopes to become one of the *shen*, immortals.

The founder, Lao Zi, meaning "Old Master," wrote his teachings in *Dao De Jing*, the Daoist bible. *Dao De Jing* is a philosophical book of complex ideas all compressed into 5000 characters. Much like *Tianshu*, *Dao De Jing* is open-ended, asking questions rather than giving specific answers.

*Dào,*道,directly translates into the English, "the way." The Dao is compared to the hub of a wheel from which all things are formed. In its entirety, it can't be defined through words but is the ancestor of all doctrines, the mystery of all mysteries. It occurs most commonly in nature, such a flowing water, where the mountains meet the valley, a sexual act, or the awakening of one's psychic awareness.

According to Daoists, the empty space within a pot is as important to the pot's existence as the shaped clay surrounding the space. This basically relates back to the concept of the Yin and the Yang. The Yin, representing the feminine and the natural world, and the Yang representing the masculine and what is man made, are opposite poles that unify in balance.

> "Daoism is rooted in symbolism; the very characters of the Chinese language are themselves potent symbols, which may also reflect the individual spirit of the writer. Calligraphy itself – the movement of the brush across the paper – symbolizes the flow of vital currents through the universe, the threads of linear continuity which the Daoist perceives as the energizing elements of the cosmos." (Sacred Symbols, 1996, p. 6)

As *Hànzì (*Chinese characters) and the balancing of calligraphic marks across a space are deeply anchored in Daoist philosophy, there is an obvious association between Xu's characters and Daoist symbols. Interestingly, the twist is that Xu's symbols are not Chinese characters, but the same rules regarding their form apply. Therefore, this essay will regard Xu's characters as "Other"[2] characters of the Chinese language. This serves as an alternative to looking at them as false characters. while enhancing the Daoist angle.

Much like Hieroglyphics, Chinese characters are age-old ideographs. Unlike Hieroglyphics however, they survived by evolving. Beginning as quite primitive illustrations, they developed into complex abstract art forms. Complication of everyday communication resulted in a demand for simplistic representation of abstract ideas. Excluding phonetic development, arbitrarily and non-arbitrarily combining simplistic characters into new words was the solution to this problem. As a result, simplistic

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[2] T.J. Clarke, in his essay *Modernism and the Chinese Other in Twentieth-Century Art Criticism*, refers to Chinese art as the Other of Western Modernism. In his own words he has described Chinese art as, "a vacuity, a vagueness, a mere mysticism of sight." (Yang, 1998, 129) For this reason the same terminology has been used to describe Xu's ideographs.

characters reoccur regularly both individually and in complex characters throughout the Chinese language. If a combination does not exist however, it is excluded from the Chinese dictionary and has no meaning.

In order to standardize characters, a basic rule system involving the break down of each character into a variety of strokes was invented. (There is a stroke order, which may vary, but not often, depending on the character.)

Example of Xu's "Other" characters, real characters, and two dictionary guidance sections are on display as references inorder to explain the idea behind "Other" characters.

Plate 14 lists currently existing radicals by which to look for unidentifiable characters in a modern Chinese dictionary. When searching for a desired character, one must identify the radical, find it under the number of strokes it is composed of and then look for the character in the section specifically allotted to the radical. Once found, the sound for the character is given. The meaning is then located by the sound, arranged alphabetically.

Xu's methodology was quite simple. In reality, he did not falsify Chinese characters, but basically used the combinations of strokes and radicals not chosen. Referring back to Daoism, Xu's "Other" characters, though unchosen, still exist. They are vital to the existence of the chosen characters. The two components together constitute the whole, the Yin and the Yang.

Similarly, words making up language exist when something needs labeling. Senses preceding verbalization follow experiences and are vital to the existence of a words. In an abstract way, Xu's "Other" characters represent senses and intuition that precede words.

The majority of the three year time period spent on *Tianshu* was devoted purely to language research. To impersonate Chinese characters to the point of actually fooling a native Chinese reader is, no doubt, a difficult and time-consuming task. Ironically, the accomplishment lies in the fact that in *Tianshu's* selection of 4000 imposter Chinese characters, not a single one is the real thing.

The circled character in Plate 15 is an example of one of Xu's many inauthentic combinations. The ideograph is composed

部首检字表

(一) 部首目录

部首左边的号码表示部首的次序

一 画

1 丶
2 一
3 丨
4 丿
5 乙(一 ㇆ ㇗)

二 画

6 亠
7 冫
8 冖
9 讠(言)
10 二
11 十
12 厂
13 匚
14 卜(⺊)
15 刂
16 冂
17 八(丷)
18 人(入)
19 亻
20 勹
ク(见刀)
21 儿
22 几(⺇)
23 厶
24 又(ㄡ)
25 廴
26 卩(㔾)
27 阝(在左)
28 阝(在右)
29 凵
30 刀(ク)
31 力
㔾(见卩)

三 画

32 氵
33 忄(⺗)
34 宀
35 丬(爿)
36 广
37 门(門)
38 辶(⻌)
39 工
40 土
41 士
42 艹
43 大
44 廾(在下)
45 尢
46 寸
47 弋
48 扌
49 小(⺌)
50 口
51 囗
52 巾
53 山
54 彳
55 彡
56 夕
57 夂
58 犭
59 饣(食)
60 彐(⺕ 彑)
61 尸
62 己(巳)
63 弓
64 屮
65 女
66 幺
67 子(孑)
68 纟(糹)
69 马(馬)
70 巛

四 画

71 灬
72 斗
73 文
74 方
75 火
76 心
77 户
78 礻(示)
79 王
80 韦(韋)
81 木
82 犬
83 歹
84 车(車)
85 戈
86 比
87 瓦
88 止
89 攴
90 日
91 曰(⺜)
92 贝(貝)
93 见(見)
94 父
95 牛(牜 ⺧)
96 手
97 毛
98 气
99 攵
100 片
101 斤
102 爪(⺤)
103 月(⺼)
104 欠
105 风(風)
106 殳
⺗(见忄)
107 肀(⺻ 聿)
爿(见丬)
108 毋(母)
109 水(氺)

五 画

110 穴
111 立
112 疒
113 衤
114 示 (⺬见礻)
115 石
116 龙(龍)
117 业
118 目
119 田
120 罒
121 皿
122 钅(金)
123 矢
124 禾
125 白
126 瓜
127 鸟(鳥)
128 用
氺(见水)
129 矛
聿(见肀)
艮(见艮)
130 疋(⺪)
131 皮
母(见毋)

六 画

132 衣
133 羊(⺶ ⺷)
134 米
135 耒
136 老
137 耳
138 臣
139 西(覀)
140 页(頁)
141 虍
142 虫
143 缶
144 舌
145 竹(⺮)
146 臼
147 自
148 血
149 舟
150 羽
聿(见肀)
151 艮(⺙)
152 糸 (糹见纟)

七 画

153 辛
154 言 (訁见讠)
155 麦(麥)
156 走
157 赤
158 豆
車(见车)
159 酉
160 辰
161 豕
162 卤(鹵)
163 里
貝(见贝)
見(见见)
164 足(⻊)
165 豸
166 谷
167 采
168 身
169 角

八 画

170 青
171 其
172 雨(⻗)
173 齿(齒)
174 黾(黽)
食(见饣)
175 金 (釒见钅)
176 隹
177 鱼(魚)
門(见门)

九 画

178 音
179 革
頁(见页)
180 骨
181 食 (飠见饣)
182 鬼
風(见风)
韋(见韦)

十 画

183 髟
184 鬲
馬(见马)

十一画

185 麻
186 鹿
麥(见麦)
鹵(见卤)
鳥(见鸟)
魚(见鱼)

十二画以上

187 黑
黽(见黾)
188 鼠
189 鼻
齒(见齿)
龍(见龙)

Plate14
List of Radicals
Concise English-Chinese/
Chinese-English Dictionary

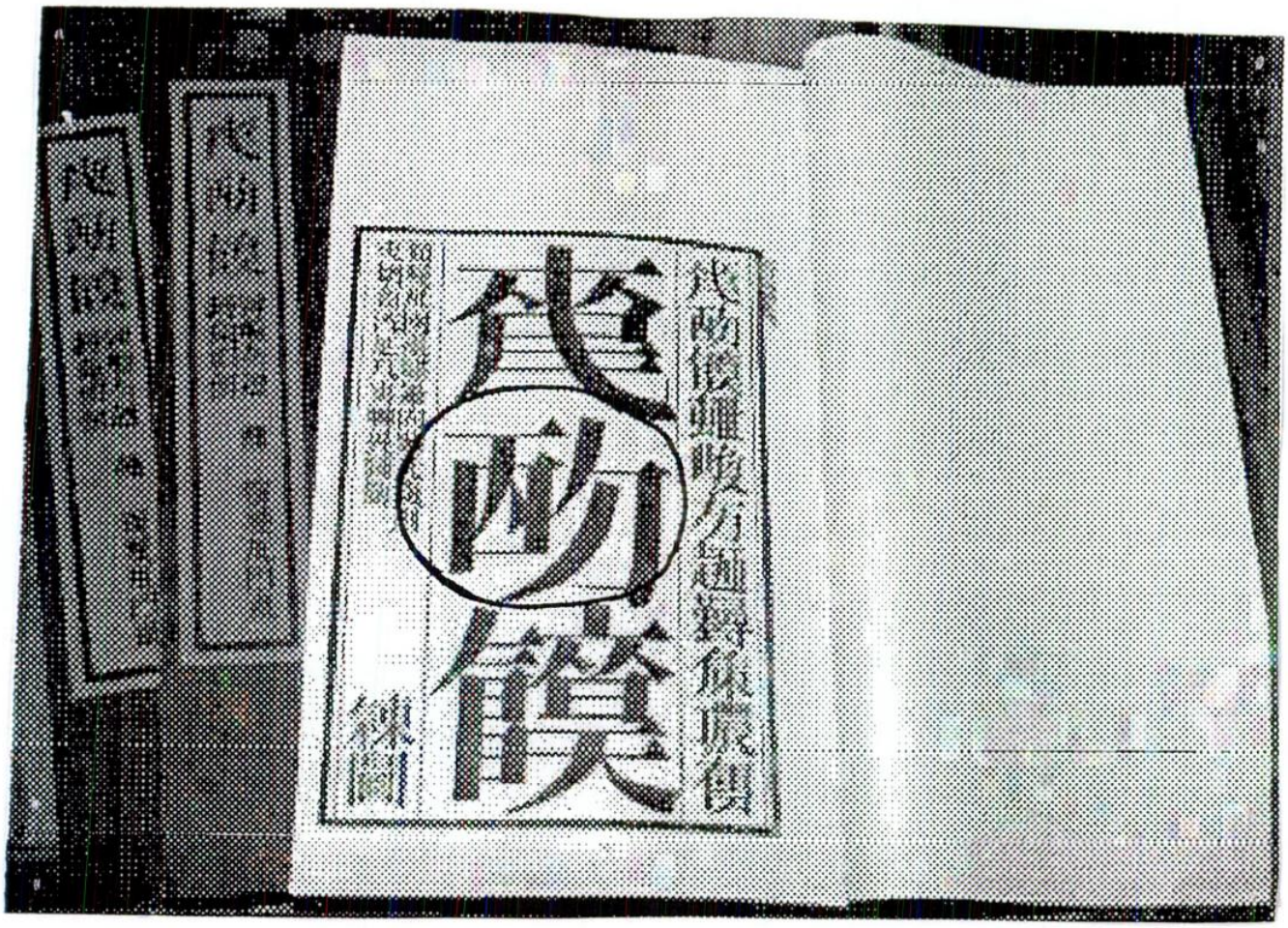


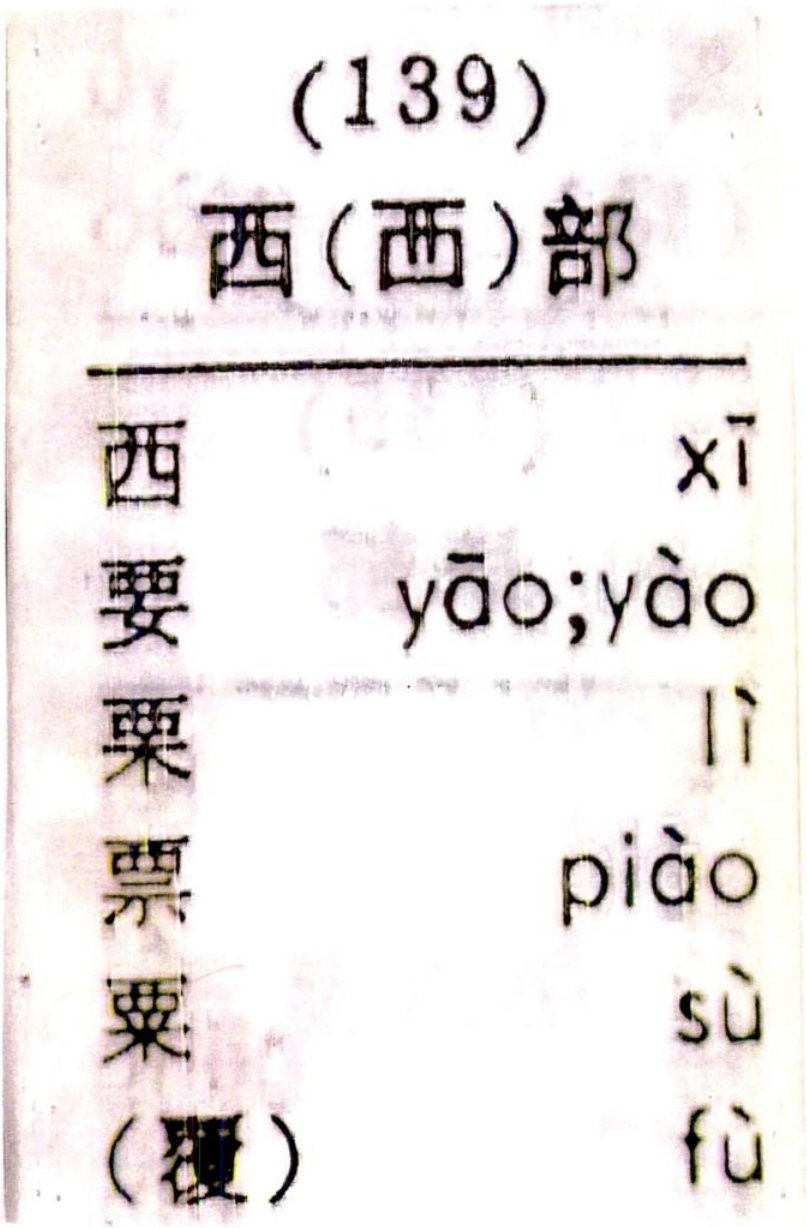
Plate 15, Xu Bing, *Tianshu.*

of 西 (*xī* meaning *west*) and 勿 (not existing independently but found in 黎 , for example, *lí* means multitude). Because 西 is the radical, its section is also shown in Plate 16 to provide proof that the combination does not exist. The entire body of radicals shown in Plate 14 proves that 勿 is not a radical. Therefore the combination 西勿 has no sound or meaning.

Plate 17, in contrast, is a passage taken from an actual text used for teaching Chinese reading and writing to non-native speakers and native speaking children. It, describes the five different stages in a person's life, according to Chinese culture. For the purposes of this essay, it is used purely as an example of authentic characters.

Xu had difficulty with this approach however, due to the fact that languages constantly change depending on the time period of their use. Xu had to research his topic quite extensively to ensure that his combinations had never existed in thousands of years of Chinese civilization. On the opening of the exhibition in Beijing he was kept in check by numerous critics and scholars exhausting themselves searching for a single ideograph existing as a character.

Surprisingly, in its invalidity, *Tianshu* still remains solid. The entire installation, appearing rich in history and ancient religious teaching is an entirely sensory experience.



(139)

西(西)部

西	xī
要	yāo;yào
栗	lì
票	piào
粟	sù
(覆)	fù

Plate 16, Section 139 (*Xi*), Concise Chinese-English/ English-Chinese Dictionary.

人的一生一般要经历童年、少年、青年、中年和老年五个阶段。

天真、可爱的孩子享受着美好的童年。少年是指十岁左右到十五、六岁的阶段，这大概是从小学四、五年级到刚上高中的年龄。我们一般称十五、六岁到三十岁左右的人为青年。人在这个阶段要解决的最大问题是就业和婚姻。人到了中年，也就是到了四、五十岁的年纪。中年人一般上有老，下有小，这个阶段人最忙碌，也最辛苦。中年以后，人就进入了老年。有这样一句古诗："人生七十古来稀。"因此，七十岁又称"古稀之年"。不过，如今人活到八十岁也不是什么新鲜事了。老年人一生中最后一个时期称为"晚年"。

Plate 17,
Stages of a Person's Life,
Chinese Language and Culture University Level C Text Book.

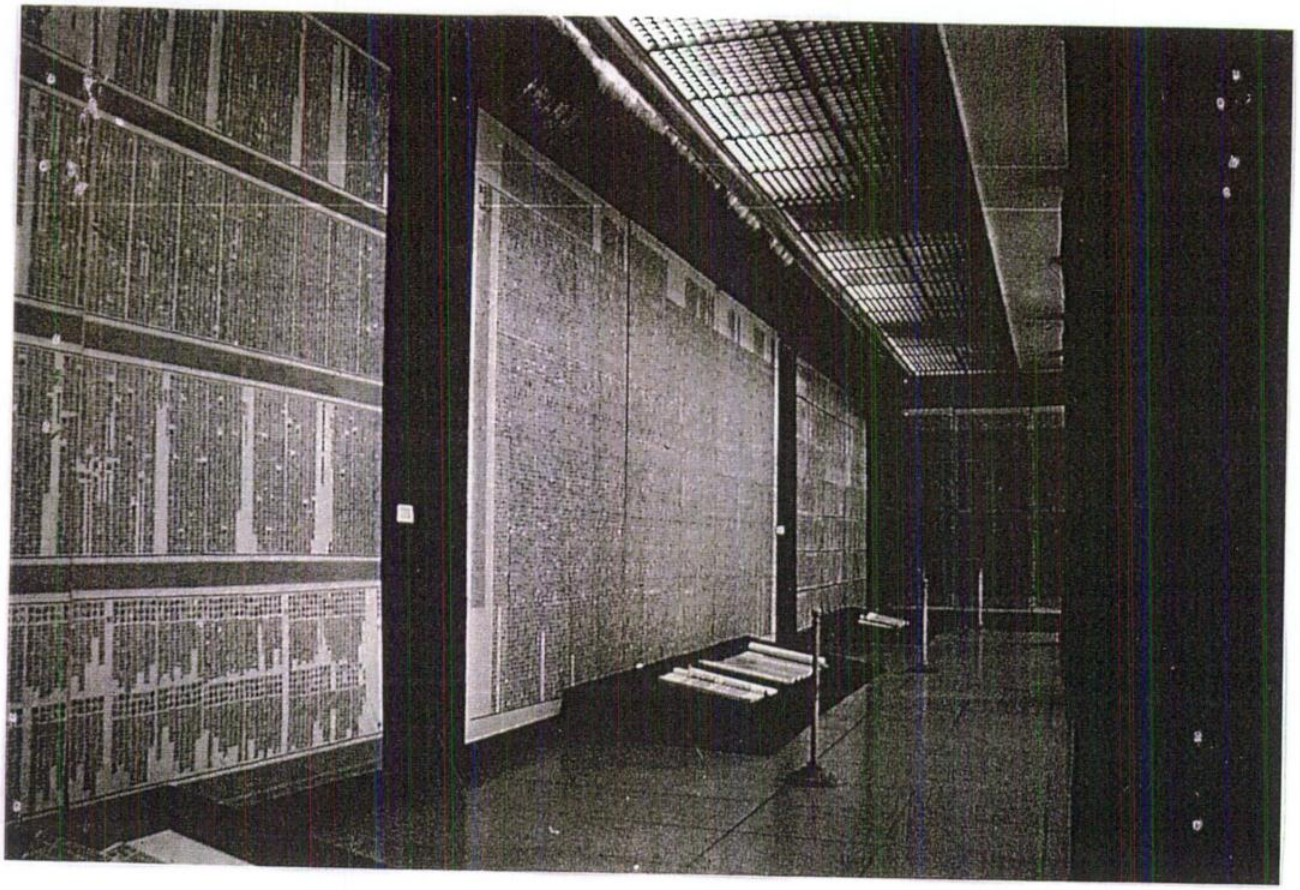


Plate 18, Xu Bing, *Tianshu*.

Chapter Three:
Tianshu: A Commentary on Chinese Culture

For the purposes of examining *Tianshu* from a Chinese perspective, this essay will refer to various sections taken from Jung Chang's Wild Swans . The first section (Appendix 3) illustrates a Cultural Revolutionary experience. Wild Swans is an account of the lives of women through three generations in a twentieth century Chinese family. The detailed description of their lifestyles and attitudes towards China and its people gives the reader a feeling of the Chinese political climate's instability throughout the twentieth century.

With regards to *Tianshu*, this passage provides detailed description of one particular incident. On a larger scale this demonstrates the average struggling Chinese person's mixed feelings in an unstable China. One part of them is torn by their pride in treasures and the culture of previous Dynasties while the other side needs to break from old traditions keeping China from catching up with the rest of the world.

The same struggle exists in *Tianshu.* *Tianshu* reflects a tormented state of mind seeking a peaceful solution/ happy

compromise to an undefined Chinese contemporary art. *Tianshu* resolves the problem by exercising Chinese traditional practices while at the same time cutting attachments with it. In attempting to define modern-day Chinese culture/contemporary art (*xinchao meishu*), it has become a modern-day treasure. It struggles, however, to exist in a China, as described in Wild Swans, with a history of cutting ties that hold itself back in competition with other nations.

Appendix 4 illustrates Mao's eagerness to compete with world powers' steel production eventually leaving much of the Chinese population hungry.

Mao's Cultural Revolution was essentially doing this. In condemning and destroying all forms of culture and independent thought processing, he was breaking China from tradition. He was afraid that it might slow China down. Where as Mao and Lin Biao's Red Guards saw culture as excess baggage, Xu attempted to use it to his advantage. The following group of artists were of the belief that it is impossible to entirely cut one's ties with culture.

The *China's New Art Post – 1989* exhibition (held in 1993) placed Xu amongst a group of artists called the *Ritual and Purgation:*

Endgame Artists, including Gu Wenda and Wu Shanzhuan. *Endgame* artists characteristically payed homage to Mao, more accurately expressed the duality of a love/hate relationship with their culture. These artists were generally of the same age group, usually having had participated in or experienced the effects of the young Red Guards. They were known for their ruthlessness in demanding absolute involvement in their work, and they often worked with Chinese characters. The most important factor was that their work, called *Endgame* art, aimed at an ultimate statement by purging intellect to make room for the profound.

Tianshu falls under this category not only for the mixed feelings of pride and shame Chinese viewers felt for it in its exposure of both the magnificence and the downfalls of Chinese culture, but also for the intricacy and precision with *Tianshu* was carried out.

Tianshu's demand for hours of disciplined and repetitious craft, Xu's involvement in the Cultural Revolution, and his use of traditional Chinese subject matter all constitute *Tianshu* as *Endgame* art. The most important factor however, is

that in its illegibility all intellectual substance has been purged. As a result, the viewer is left pondering the spiritual significance of *Tianshu*. *Tianshu* surpasses human comprehension being the epitome of what is profound, mysterious and inexpressible.

An ironic parallel can be drawn between Mao's intent to disown Chinese cultural tradition, an example being his early dismantling of Confucian hierarchies in order to create a class-free Communist China, and Xu's attempt to purge *Tianshu* of any intellectual substance. In reality, both are ideal and unobtainable situations. The interpreter reads in *Tianshu* what already exists in his or her self. Similarly, destroying ancient treasures of China and stifling artistic creativity never truly penetrated to the minds and customs of the people. These were imbedded in generations of practice and tradition rather than in material substance.

Returning to the process through which *Tianshu* was carried out, another parallel can be drawn between the paradox in the amount of energy put into a tiring time consuming task, amounting to a final

statement of nothingness, and what *Tianshu* is versus what it appears to be. It initially strikes the viewer as a large heavenly shrine dedicated to the preservation of culture, history, and religion. Ironically, it is nothing more than a visual sensation and an intellectual void.

> "[Xu Bing's installations *Tianshu* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*] are monumental works of woodblock carving and stone rubbing, both important crafts for the traditional literati. But Xu exponentially increases the significance of the act of craft itself, so that it becomes ritualistic and actually takes predominance over the significance of the forms presented, be they words or walls." (Tsong-zung, 1993, p. 4)

To emphasize *Tianshu's* repetitive ritual while enhancing its uniformity and efficiency, Xu Bing carved each ideograph on its own wooden block. (*Tianshu* was printed by wooden movable type.[4]) More than just efficiency however, drew Xu to woodblock printing. China went through a period known as the Woodcut Movement:

[4] 1. Chinese invented wooden movable type in the 11th century AD, but was not commonly practised due to the almost infinite number of Chinese characters that actually exist, a number Chinese scholars have yet to agree upon.

> "In essence the woodcut movement was similar to an undercut resistance movement: it was characterized by a strong fighting spirit, a populist approach and a raging desire to liberate the Chinese people from their wartime enslavement. The Woodcut Movement was strong evidence of Modern Chinese intellectuals' concern for the suffering of the people." (Tsong-zung, 1993, 11)

Xu also, received both his bachelors and masters degrees in printmaking from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art. His advanced degree thesis dealt with the repetitive imagery in Andy Warhol's prints. His 1987 show, entitled *Five Series of Repitions*, depicted a selection of woodblock prints beginning with a black image of an uncut block leading into images of rice paddies and tadpole ponds. The image eventually worked its way into a complete whiteness in which the entire surface of the block was chiseled away. As one can see, ritual and purgation are familiar territories to Xu.

Ghosts Pounding the Wall, like *Tianshu,* was renowned for the absurd amount of time put into one repetitive task in combination with its monumental quality. In the summer of 1990, from May 18 through June 10, Xu employed several students and farmers to make rubbings of sections of the Great Wall. He later carefully numbered and

reconstructed their order in museum environments creating the illusion of a Great Wall.

> "Xu maintains that *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* and his other works reflect the 'meaninglessness of culture.' He points to the failure of the wall in keeping other cultures from influencing China by repelling their armies." (New Art Examiner, May 92, p. 37)

In *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, Xu once again is duplicating a familiar repetitive process whilst playing on the duality of both the magnificence and the down falls of the Great Wall. He duplicated its monumental size and splendor, but the reality that it has become a paper reproduction, emphasizes the functional uselessness.

Like Ghosts Pounding the Wall, Tianshu is also torn between two opposing poles: one a shrine for Chinese culture and the other making a mockery of it. *Tianshu's* illegibility reduces its informative value to nothing in a single glance. When first on display in Beijing, it apparently caused great controversy, dividing spectators and critics. Many saw *Tianshu* as a criticism of the inability to express one's self in modern day China. Others were overwhelmed by its aesthetic magnificence. In its beauty, they simply read a tribute to Chinese culture and eagerly awaited a

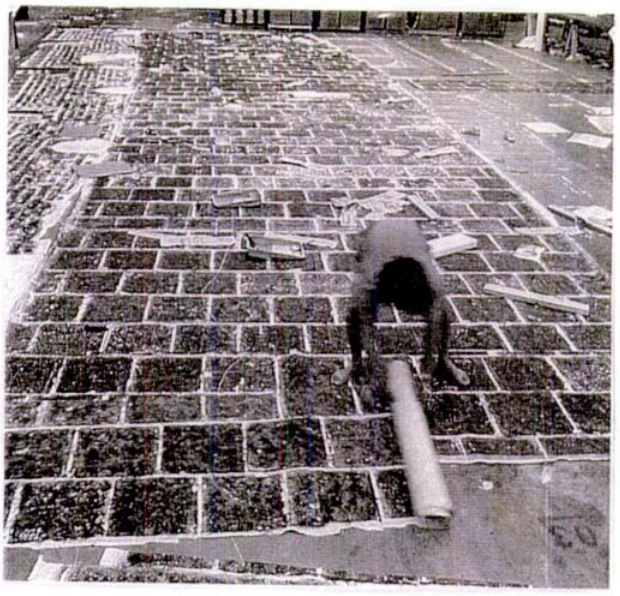


Plate 19, Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall.*

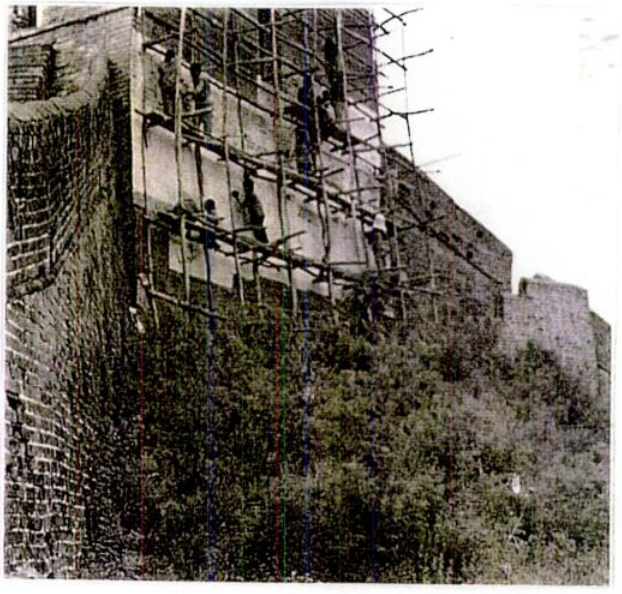


Plate 20, Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall.*

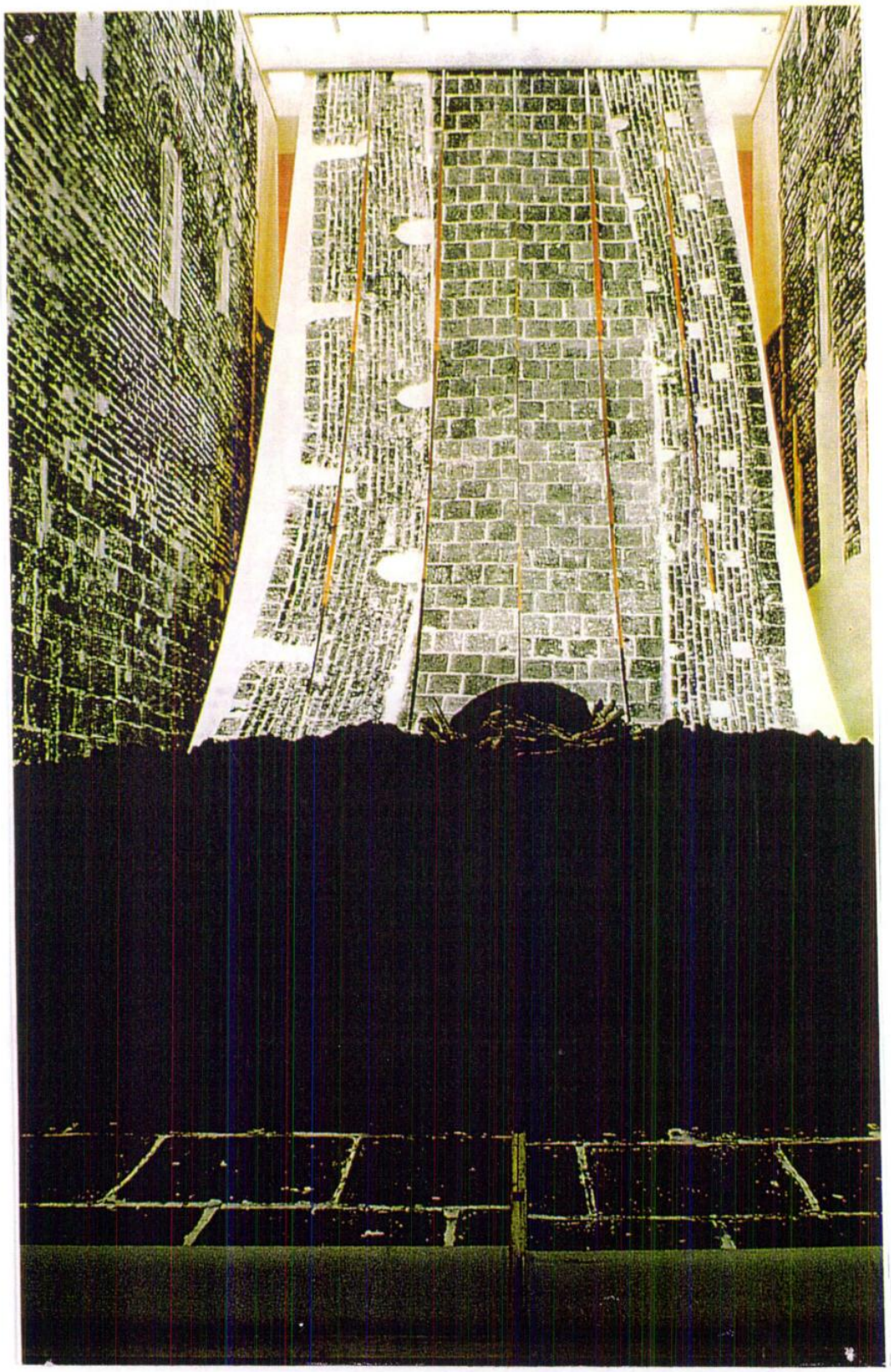


Plate 21, Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall.*

positive response from the rest of the world.[7]

It is important to understand the value of Chinese characters as the written language of Chinese culture. They play a part in art, religion, philosophy, and history. They are also said to aide the development of one's mnemonic devices. Calligraphy, in China, the concentration of thinking and acting, in the spontaneous moment of writing is considered the creation of a classic masterpiece. This special relationship between arbitrarily linked meanings and the nonsensical art forms does not exist in modern-day languages using alphabets.

Artists such as Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and Jang Jiechang's degradation of a thousand year old art form by manipulating its forms leaving altered and absent meanings, implies a disrespect for Chinese culture. Under normal circumstances, all classroom texts, newspapers, and official documents are written with the utmost stringency. The illusion created by *Tianshu's* magnificence in contrast to the reality that the characters are false, down plays the prestige of the Chinese language and art of calligraphy. This

[7] Note that countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan use Chinese characters in their own languages. These countries share religious beleifs as well as have histories that all overlap.

particular passage provides further insight into the relationship between Chinese artists and Chinese culture:

> "What is not new, but has its roots deep in Confucian concept of virtue, is [the] artists' sense of moral obligation, and their belief that, however much they condemn the culture of their time, they are part of it, and part of their duty is to cleanse it. Mockery and irony imply a moral judgement, a sense of value, as powerfully as does outright condemnation." (Tsong-zung, 1993, 22)

In criticizing Chinese culture, these artists responsibly contribute to it taking ownership for their part. Xu Bing uses *Tianshu* to aide correction of the damage done to Chinese culture during the Cultural Revolution.

Many critics have made more optimistic interpretations of *Tianshu* than just an obligatory criticism. They have read it is a new beginning, feeling its use of a modern Western Vocabulary (installation work) in combination with various forms of traditional text presentation attempts to close the gap created by the Cultural Revolution.

Chinese-American critic, Alice Yang, on the other hand, views *Tianshu* as a monument of mourning for the loss described in Jung Chang's passage. She interprets *Tianshu* as attempting reinvent

Chinese tradition, but in its meaninglessness, confronts the impossibility of the task. In her essay, "Xu Bing: Rewriting Culture," she quotes Rey Chow's "Pedagogy, Trust, Chinese Intellectuals in the 1990s: Fragments of a Post-Catastrophic Discourse" as saying:

> "In the continual trauma that is "modernity," the question that returns to haunt the Chinese intellectual is that of the continuity and (re)production of Chinese culture. . . . How is culture – in ruins - to be passed on, by whom, and with what means." (Yang, 1998, 24)

Alice Yang describes *Tianshu* as the, "staged reappearance of Chinese tradition." "Staged" has many meanings often referring to acting and the grand presentation of an event. Xu Bing has created an environment where culture can represent itself after hiding during the Cultural Revolution and has drawn an audience it may present itself in front of.

Alice Yang takes advantage of "staging" in every sense of the word. *Tianshu's* sutra-scrolls, wall texts, and books are a backdrop, a "stage," for all 4000 make-believe characters to perform upon as if they contain informative value. Unfortunately,

they are performing out of necessity, because they can't remember what they were supposed to say. As the real tradition was destroyed, it can never come out of hiding. Any duplications will only ever be false performances.

Conclusion

Xu uses people's narrow-minded prejudgments, their immediate assumption that *Tianshu* has been written in Chinese characters, to reflect a common mentality that physical appearance indicates what lies beneath the surface. In actuality, this serves as a deceiving barricade often preventing one from taking a closer look in order to distinguish what is real from pretend.

Xu, now residing in a foreign country, probably became aware of such responses when trying to communicate with people outside his culture. His Chinese physicality probably discouraged many individuals from getting to know his actual personality. When in fact they may have been more compatible with him than with someone of their own race.

As an artist residing in a North American environment, Xu's "Chineseness" in both his person and artwork, stand out in the local community. In contrast, his foreign influences are apparent when compared to artists and friends in China. His international success, evident from his ability to appeal to a variety of cultures, frees *Tianshu* of one specific national identity. People from all walks of life can relate to *Tianshu*. Its absence of literal meaning

in its text opens it up to all nationalities, age groups, religions, sexes, personal experiences, and so on.

In restricting *Tianshu,* as Alice Yang did when labeling it as a monument of mourning, it cannot achieve its full potential internationally. *Tianshu's* freedom from a label is achieved by its continuous duality, the tension between many opposite poles united in one work of art. Singular rigid interpretations confine *Tianshu* to either the black or white side of the spectrum when in actuality it can be both. It is a criticism of Chinese culture while at the same time an appraisal of it. It is Chinese artwork, while still being international. Its texts are both rich and at the same time vacant. *Tianshu* has the unusual ability of allowing opposites to exist simultaneously. As Daoism's opposites, the Yin and the Yang, in unison constitute the whole, *Tianshu* unites polarities under the same Sutras.

Because it is both black and white in a single moment, *Tianshu* lacks the ability to take a particular stance. This is why the title refers to *Tianshu* as a "mirror," *A Mirror for Analyzing the World*. A mirror indiscriminately reflects what lies in its

foreground. *Tianshu* is open to all that come its way. However, the characters of *Tianshu's* Sutras, wall texts, and volumes of books are reflections of what different individuals see "in" themselves as opposed to "on" themselves. This special mirror reflects interiors rather than exteriors. As a page of text confines everyone to a single history, opinion, race, sex, and so forth, *Tianshu* allows for what is written in people to take precedence over what has been put down on paper. How people interpret *Tianshu* is reminiscent of what lies within.

This brief description articulately summarizes *Tianshu's* purpose:

The books were silent, their language a dream, but the gestures of the piece spoke volumes about the human need to speak, to express one's spirit even when the meaning seems to have slipped away. (Dreissen, 1997, p. 70)

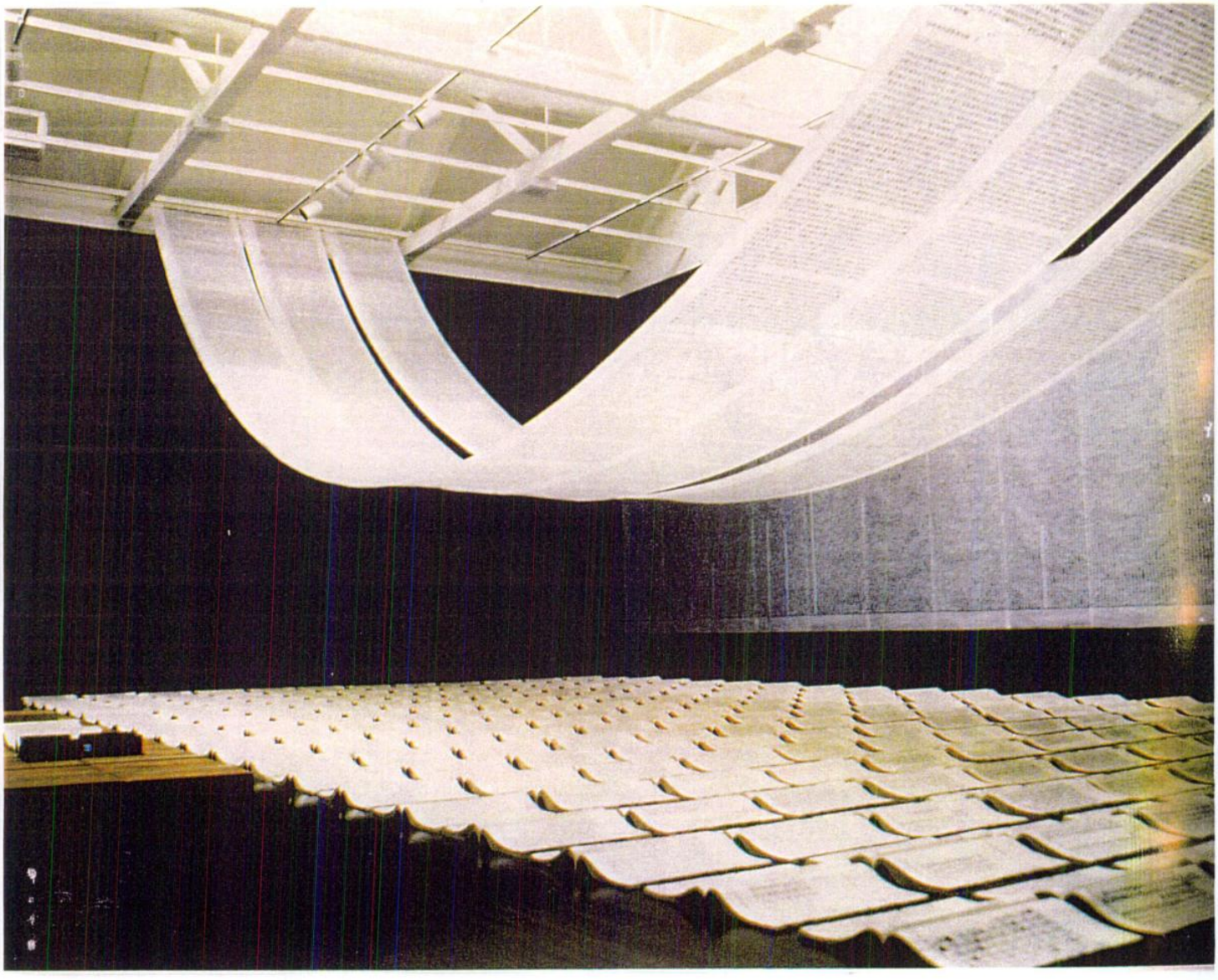


Plate 22, Xu Bing, *Tianshu*.

APPENDIX

Appendix One *Thought Reform Through Labor* Wild Swans

"According to Mao's rhetoric, we were sent to the countryside 'to be reformed'. Mao advocated 'thought reform through labor' for everyone but never explained the relationship between the two. Of course, no one asked for clarification. Merely to contemplate such a question was tantamount to treason. In reality, everyone in China knew that hard labor, particularly in the countryside, was always punishment. It was noticeable that none of Mao's henchmen, the members of the newly established Revolutionary Committees, army officers- and very few of their children- had to do it.

The first of us to be expelled was my father. Just after New Year 1969 he was sent to Miy*i* county in the region of Xichang , on the eastern edge of the Himalayas, an area so remote that it is China's satellite launch base today. It lies about 300 miles from Chengdu , four day's journey by truck, as there was no railway. In ancient times, the area was used for dumping exiles, because its mountains and waters were said to be permeated with a mysterious 'evil air'. In today's terms, the mysterious 'evil air' was subtropical diseases. A camp was set up there to accommodate the former stall of the provincial government. There were thousands of such camps throughout China. They were called 'cadres' schools, but apart from the fact that they were not schools, they were not just for officials either. Writers, scholars, scientists, teachers, doctors, and actors who had become 'useless' in Mao's know-nothing new order were also dispatched there." (Chang, 1993, pp.504-505)

Appendix Two *Why Asia?* Why Asia?

The possibility of a truly global culture is the question that has occupied critics and theorists for almost a decade now, continuing to provoke contention and debate. If we take the particular case of Asian American art, its development presents an instructive example of the tensions and the challenges that arise in the negotiation of disparate cultures, whether within a specifically American context or within a global one[1].

Awareness of Asian American art as a distinct entity has spread and deepened dramatically in the last decade. The flurry of events which took place in New York during the past year is indicative. There was a national conference as well as two major exhibitions devoted to Asian American art in New York, including Asia/ America, which is on view at Asia Society across town.[2] Indeed, many Asian Americans working in the field of visual arts - artists, curators, administrators, and critics-have come to function more and more as a community, attempting to forge ties and to demarcate critical space for the articulation of an Asian American culture.

The emergence of the field is closely linked to the history of Asian immigration to the U.S. Asians now constitute one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the U.S., reaching a critical mass that has registered its effects not only on the U.S. census but economically, socially, and politically on the very foundations of U.S. society. It is a group shaped by particular experience - by its own pattern of immigration and settlement, which is quite different when compared, say to that of African Americans; by the transmission of specific cultural traditions and practices often at variance with mainstream American culture; by the

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[1] Originally presented as a paper for a panel of the same name, Taipei Gallery, New York, April 15, 1994. See *Credits* for details. Eds.

[2] Beyond Boundaries: First National Asian American Arts Conference, organized by Asian Arts Alliance, New York, December 17-18, 1993. See "Asian American Exhibitions Reconsidered." Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art, organized by The Queens Museum of Art, New York; originally on view October 15, 1993 - January 9, 1994. See "Looking for the Identity of Korean Art." Asia/America: Identities in Asian American Art, organized by Asia Society, New York, and guest curator Margo Machida; originally on view February 16 - June 26, 1994. *Eds.*

burden of being identified as outsiders and "model minority," often a cause of friction with other ethnic groups. And so, Asian Americans have to come to recognize their unique role on the stage of American race relations. Asian American art has been given impetus by these developments, reflecting its attempt at cultural self-definition at a historic moment.

Yet, within the community itself, opinions have been extremely mixed about the strategies for and efficacy of promoting Asian American art. There is, first of all, little agreement as to what constitutes Asian American art as such. Is it simply a descriptive label referring purely to the racial background of the artist? Or does the term serve a critical purpose designating a kind of art with shared concerns, vocabularies, and histories that imply the combination of Asian and Western modes? If so, what does Asian American art look like? Can there actually be a common denominator, given the many different ethnic groups that are covered under the rubric, not to mention the wide array of interests and stylistic approaches adopted by individual artists? While the term "Asian American" continues to be circulated and adopted, its meanings remain inexact and elusive.

It is not surprising, then, that little consensus exists either as to how Asian American art should be best served. Do group exhibitions devoted exclusively to it help or hinder its cause? Do such exhibitions only demarcate and thus enforce the gap between mainstream and margin? Or do they help to expose questions of difference, and bring visibility to the problems of assimilating into American society? After all, this is a democratic country, but you must speak in order to be heard.

But while the Asian American community debates these issues, treading delicately between the need for alliance and dialogue and the resistance to cliché and self-ghettoization , many critics in the mainstream and popular press continue to misunderstand, ignore, or stereotype its efforts. Take the example of a recent review by Kay Larson which appeared in *New York* magazine, written as a response to the *Asia/America*

exhibition.[3] At one point, she states: "The migrants tell of loneliness, sleeping on the floors, working at dull jobs, learning that nobody cares. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? I could sympathize, and I do, but what did they expect?" I have my own reservations about the exhibition, but there is a sense of latent hostility in Larson's review. "Go home if you don't like this country," she seems to imply.

My point is not so much that critics are biased, but that the wider dissemination of art by Asian Americans in this country is still fraught with contradictions and difficulties. At the same time that Asian American artists try to articulate their own position within this society, they run the risk of reducing it into a formulaic set of generalities. Trying to open up a space for critical discussion within their own community, they run the risk of isolation and segregation. But if they do not do all of this, then they also lose the possibility of articulating the distinctiveness of their experience and culture, and they run the risk of invisibility and incomprehension. Whatever they do, their position in relation to the mainstream remains highly ambivalent.

This situation has many parallels to the question of a global culture. Recently I organized a panel for the College Art Association on Chinese artists who have immigrated to the West.[4] I was struck by their evolution. While in China, they produced works that engaged directly with Chinese philosophy and social conditions. In the West, they shifted their approach and vocabularies to modes that are much more readily identified as Western. The change was motivated by the desire to respond to new audiences in the West. But in the process, much of the challenge and power of their work was also lost. They revealed to me how difficult it is for Asian art to enter into a dialogue with the West without losing a sense of its cultural and historical specificity. Yet, how could it not respond to the complexities of its present moment, of its evolving relationship to the West, without reproducing a vision that is static or nostalgic? Western norms continue to monopolize many critical discussions posing as the standard by which most art is judged and admitted into circulation. If there is going to be a truly global culture, then we are still some time away from it. Yang, 1998, p. 103-106)

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[3] Kay Larson, "Asia Minor," *New York* 27, no. 10 (March 7, 1994), p.80.
[4] See "Siting China." Eds.

Appendix Three *Soar to Heaven and Pierce the Earth* Wild Swans

"Lin Biao called for everything that represented the old culture to be destroyed, some pupils in my school started to smash things up. Being more than 2000 years old, the school had a lot of antiques and was therefore a prime site of action. The school gateway had an old tiled roof with carved eaves. These were hammered to pieces. The same happened to the sweeping blue-glazed roof of the big temple which had been used as a ping pong hall. The pair of giant bronze incense burners in front of the temple were toppled, and some boys urinated into them. In the back garden, pupils with big hammers and iron rods went along the sandstone bridges casually breaking the little statues. On one side of the sports field was a pair of rectangular tablets made of red sandstone, each twenty feet high. A huge rope was tied around them, and two gangs pulled. It took them a couple of days, as the fountains were deep. They had to get some workers from outside to dig a hole around the tablets. When the monuments finally crashed down amidst cheers, they lifted part of the path that ran behind them.

All the things I loved were disappearing. The saddest thing of all for me was the ransacking of the library: the golden tiled roof, the delicately sculpted windows, the blue painted chairs. . . . Bookshelves were turned upside down, and some pupils tore books to pieces just for the hell of it. Afterward, X-shaped white paper strips with black characters were stuck on what was left of the doors and windows to signal that the building was sealed.

Books were major targets of Mao's order to destroy. Because they had not been written within the last few months, and therefore did not quote Mao on every page, some Red Guards declared that they were 'poisonous weeds.' With the exception of Marxist classics and the works of Stalin, Mao, and the late Lu Xun, whose name Mme Mao was using for her personal vendettas, books were burning all across China. The country lost most of its written heritage." (Chang, 1993, pp.383-388.)

Appendix Four

Capable Women Make a Meal Without Food: Famine Wild Swans

Mao gave full vent of his half-baked dream of turning China into a first class modern power. He called steel the 'Marshal' of industry, and ordered steel output to be doubled in one year; from 5.35 million tons in 1957 to 10.7 million tons in 1958. But instead of trying to expand the proper steel industry with skilled workers, he decided to get the whole population to take part. There was a steel quota for every unit, and for months people stopped their normal work in order to meet it. The country's economic development was reduced to the simplistic question of how many tons of steel could be produced and the entire nation was thrown into a single act. It was officially estimated that nearly 100 million peasants were pulled out of agricultural work and into steel production. They had been the labor force producing much of the countries food. Mountains were stripped bare of trees for fuel. But the output of this mass production amounted only to what people called 'cattle droppings' (*niú-shǐ-gē-da*), meaning useless turds. This absurd situation reflected not only Mao's ignorance of how the economy worked, but also an almost metaphysical disregard for reality, which might have been interesting in a poet, but in a political leader with absolute power was quite another matter. One of his main components was a deep seated contempt for human life. Not long before this he had told the Finish ambassador, 'Even if the United States had more powerful atom bombs and use them on China, blasted a hole in the earth, or blew it to pieces, while this might be a matter of great significance to the solar system, it would still be an insignificant matter as far as the universe as a whole is concerned . . .'

That summer, all of China was organized into these new units, each containing 2000 to 20,000 households. One of the forerunners of this drive was an area called Xushui, in Hebei province in North China, to which Mao took a shrine. In his eagerness to prove that they deserved Mao's attention, the local boss there claimed they were going to produce over ten times as much grain as before. Mao smiled broadly and responded: 'What are you going to do with all that food? On second

thought, it is not too bad to have too much food, really. The state doesn't want it. Everyone else has plenty of their own. But the farmers here can just eat and eat. You can eat five meals a day!' Mao was intoxicated, indulging in the eternal dream of the Chinese peasant - surplus food. After these remarks, the villagers further stroked the desires of their Great Leader by claiming that they were producing more than a million pounds of potatoes per *mǔ* (one *mǔ* is one-sixth of an acre), over 130,000 pounds of wheat per *mǔ,* and cabbages weighing 500 pounds each. It was a time when telling fantasies to one's self as well as others and believing them was practiced to an incredible degree. Peasants moved crops from several plots of land to one plot to show Party officials that they had produced a miracle harvest. Similar 'Potemkin fields' were shown off to gullible, or self-blinded, agricultural scientists, reporters, visitors from other regions and foreigners. Although these crops generally died within a few days because of untimely transplantation and harmful density, the visitors did not know that or did not want to know. A large part of the population was swept into this confused, crazy world. 'Self-deception' while deceiving others (*zì-qī-qī-rén*) gripped the nation. Many people- including agricultural scientists and senior party leaders - said they saw the miracles themselves. Those who failed to match other people's fantastic claims began to doubt and blame themselves. Under dictatorship like Mao's, where information was withheld and fabricated, it was very difficult for ordinary people to have confidence in their own experience or knowledge. Not to mention that they were now facing a nationwide tidal wave of fervor which promised to swamp any individual coolheadedness. It was easy to start ignoring reality and simply put one's faith in Mao. To go along wit the frenzy was by far the easiest course. To pause and think and be circumspect meant trouble……

The whole nation slid into doublespeak. Words became divorced from reality, responsibility, and real thoughts. Lies were told with ease because words had lost their meanings- and had ceased to be taken seriously by others. (Chang, 1993, 291-299)

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