

CHAPTER 6: BOOK FROM THE SKY - TIANSHU

This magnificent installation symbolises aspects of the old and the emerging China. While the medium and technique are traditionally Chinese, the scale and intent of the work align it with contemporary artistic practice.¹

This chapter returns to the Taoist art form, calligraphy, to examine its application in experimental contemporary installation art to thematically signify 'continuity and change'. It also returns, back to their origins in China, an acknowledgement of the Taoist influences that contributed to the development of Western installation art that were identified in the previous chapter. Xu Bing's artwork, *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991)² represents this direct, inter-cultural development in Western visual art practice, and therefore seamlessly fits the particular focus of this thesis (*Fig 1*). The artwork is experimental, contemporary, and as installation art, uses a Western form of expression; it is arguably a direct, and indirect outcome of the influence of Taoism.

In this it signals a further expansion of contemporary, experimental art beyond Western national borders into 'global art'. Let it be noted at the outset that Xu Bing is by no means a practising Taoist. He has expressed an appreciation of the relationship of his artwork to China's Ch'en Buddhism, the Chinese practice, *fang fa*, which translates as "work method", and generally, "traditional Chinese philosophy", which has its foundations in Taoism.³ It is aspects of the content of the artwork, aspects of the process used in its production, and aspects of the form of *Book From the Sky* that arguably place it within the province of China's Taoist heritage.

¹ This description of the cultural origins of Xu Bing's artwork, *Book from the Sky* is from the Queensland Art Gallery website. Cited Dec. 2008. http://qag.qld.gov.au/collection/contemporary_asian_art/xu_bing

² Xu Bing (1955 -) lives and works in Beijing, where he is Vice President of the Academy of Fine Arts, and Brooklyn in the United States of America where he maintains a studio. *A Book from the Sky* was produced between 1987 and 1991. The mediums are: woodblock prints, wood, leather, ivory, string, cloth. Banners: 103 x 6 x 8.5cm (each, folded); 19 boxes: 49.2 x 33.5 x 9.8cm (each, containing four books). Posters for the walls (optional). Installation dimensions are variable.

³ Xu Bing spoke of Zen Buddhism and koans, *fang fa* (translation: the traditional Chinese "method") and ancient Chinese philosophy as motivational aspects and themes of his practice in an interview between Bonita Ely and Xu Bing on the third of October, 2008 in Beijing. The interview was conducted with ethics approval from the University of Western Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee. Project Title: *Continuity and Change: Practice based research on the influence of Taoist concepts and calligraphy on contemporary visual art practice*. The Protocol Number for this project is H6569.

This chapter argues that central to this premise is the artist's deployment of a Taoist means of expression, calligraphic art, yet the literature surrounding the interpretation and critique of this artefact has not examined in detail its placement within this cultural context. Neither has the meaning of the artwork for readers of calligraphy been examined in depth in Western literature about *Book From the Sky*. The aim of this chapter is to contribute a deeper understanding of these two aspects of this iconic artwork. Based in part on first hand observation,⁴ the background information pertinent to interpreting *Book from the Sky* against a Taoist background will be established, including an account of the process of production. Then a Taoist analysis of the artwork will inform a contrast of interpretations from the perspectives of readers of calligraphy and non-readers, with reference to an interview with the artist.⁵

In the following sections, to distinguish discussion of the text-like images Xu Bing created for *Book from the Sky* from discussion of genuine calligraphy, references to his artwork's imagery as 'calligraphy' will be placed in inverted commas.

DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS OF PRODUCTION

THE INSTALLATION

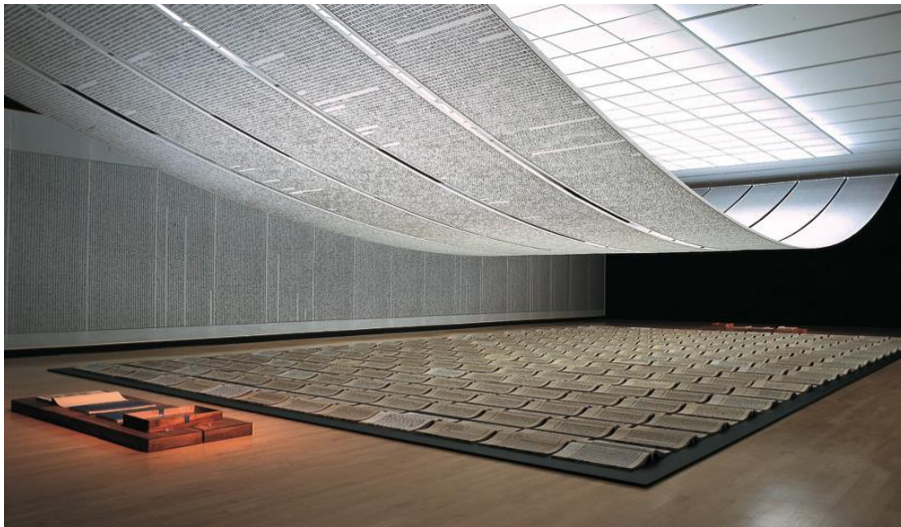


Fig 1: Xu Bing, Book from the Sky 天书 1987-1991. Paper, wood block prints, wood. The installation is composed of three components – books with their wooden cases, suspended scrolls to make a canopy, and posters along the walls.

⁴ The description is based on information from Xu Bing's website unless otherwise cited. See http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1987/book_from_the_sky

⁵ Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569.

The installation consists of books and paper scrolls printed with a representation of calligraphic text in a style from the Ming Period. The scrolls and books are installed to make an imposing, room-like space, its ceiling defined by suspended scrolls looped like a canopy, the floor plane defined by open books laid out in a formal grid pattern to define a rectangular shape beneath the canopy. The walls alongside this space may be hung with printed scrolls like posters.⁶ In front of the rows of books are purpose built, wooden boxes that store the books.

THE BOOKS⁷

The books are made of off-white *zangjing* paper, which is used for printing classic texts of great import, such as books on philosophy and religion, medicine (*Fig 2*).

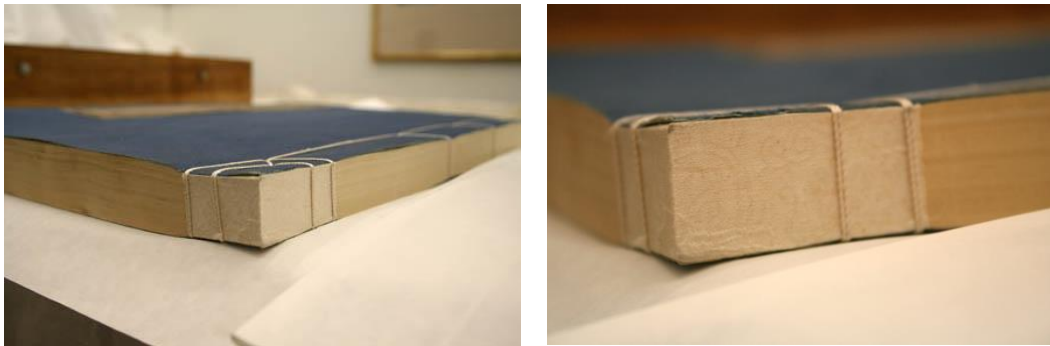


Fig 2: Book binding method showing jacquard silk corners and string sewing. Photo. B. Ely, 2008.

In discussion of his process making the books Xu Bing recalled:

... each section, each chapter really follows some [particular] book. This is why it stops here, why it stops there [pointing to aspects of a photograph of one of the books]. I don't want [to make] decision[s] by myself. I follow[ed] some [existing] book, because I don't want to give any meaning, any ideas from my mind.⁸

⁶ Xu Bing printed four versions; these do not have exactly the same components so within the convention are not editions. For example, the version of *Book from the Sky* in the Queensland Art Gallery collection has no hanging wall scrolls, and four suspended ceiling scrolls whereas other versions have wall works as well as books and suspended scrolls that make a canopy. The canopy scrolls and books with their wooden boxes are in all versions. Extra sets of books were also printed. Versions of *Book from the Sky* are in the Queensland Art Gallery, Hong Kong Museum, Ludwig Museum. Sets of the books are in the collections of Princeton University, Harvard University, Fukuoka Asian Art University, the British Museum, and private collections. From the Booklyn Artists Alliance website. <http://www.booklyn.org/artists/Xu%20Bing,%20Brooklyn,%20NY.php>

⁷ From a detailed description of all traditional aspects of *Book From the Sky* on the Hanshan Tang Books website: <http://www.hanshan.com/specials/xubingts.html>

⁸ Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569.

The books resemble the form of “a major work, a 'Classic' or 'Collectanea' of Heaven, a work with a long exegetical history which has deserved and received the close attentions of many scholars for a millennium or more”,⁹ such as the Taoist sage Lao Tzu’s, *Tao Te Ching*.¹⁰

Traditional wooden boxes were made to contain the books (*Fig 3*).



Fig 3: The books with their boxes.

Xu Bing’s books were printed from the hand carved surface of wooden blocks using a movable type press, which was invented in China in the Sung Dynasty, between 1041 and 1048 AD, long before the invention of the Gutenberg press in Germany.¹¹ The movable type press was not adopted as a mass production printing method in China as it was in the West, because it did not provide the same efficiencies when applied to printing calligraphy. In contrast to

⁹ The following describes Xu Bing’s prototype in detail: “Each of the ... volumes is stitch-bound in the six-hole pattern reserved for the best books, between blue-dyed paper covers with title labels. The volumes have covered corners (baojiao). Each sheet is folded along the central line of the block with the sheet edges bound into the spine in the most common form of traditional Chinese binding, but the six-hole stitching and the extra lining of each leaf (with a blank sheet bound inside the folds), the covered corners, etc. all indicate the top-quality binding which has been employed. The fold of the leaf is at the opening edge of each volume and is, therefore, huakou or 'decorated' with the various levels of running title, single upper fish-tail, volume and leaf 'numbering,' horizontal block rules and a series of single 'non-characters' (one for each chapter) in the position where the surname of carver would be found. Everything is in place.

“The type-style of the work is that of a Ming period songti. However, the character count across columns and rows has been chosen to suggest earlier (religious) models from the Song or Yuan periods. There are 17 characters per column and 9 per row on each page. The dimensions of the printed area (the 'chase' or 'form' in this case equivalent of the face of the block in a block-carved book) are 32.5x47 cm, although where there are upper marginal notes (meipi), these extend above the top horizontal rule”.
<http://www.hanshan.com/specials/xubingts.html>

¹⁰ Spelt “Laozi”. See P 45, Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* (2003). Pub. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press.

¹¹ See <http://www.computersmiths.com/chineseinvention/movtype.htm> Johannes Gutenberg’s movable type press was invented in Germany between 1436 and 1440.
http://germany-travel.suite101.com/article.cfm/johannes_gutenberg_moveable_type_printing

Western script, which is formed from twenty-six modular units, or letters, which are repeated to make up words, Chinese script is made up of thousands of individual pictograms, or characters. Setting up the type of thousands of characters requires enormous time and labour. Instead, whole blocks of text were carved and printed. Xu Bing's use of the moveable type method for printing foregrounds his intention to use technologies from China's history that demonstrate how advanced China has been in the past.¹² The wooden blocks depicted one 'character' each. Xu Bing created approximately four thousand different 'characters' of four different sizes and hand carved them, in reverse, using the same technique used for fine art woodcut printing.¹³ The different sizes of 'characters' quote the conventions surrounding the layout of traditional, classical, Chinese manuscripts (*Fig 4*).



Fig 4: A book's title page showing different sizes of 'text'. Photo. B. Ely, 2008.

The precise folding of the paper to make the pages of the book is registered using a traditional shape called a 'fish tail' (*Fig 5*).

¹² From Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569: "A *Book from Sky* uses a lot of technique... Chinese smart. Not only the art form, not only technique, also the communication, how the piece touches to the people's mind, how the piece is in communicates with the audience. [It] all uses Chinese way.

¹³ Xu Bing trained as a print maker, achieving a Masters degree from the Central Academy, Beijing, 1988.



Fig 5: The fish tail shape for registering folds.

Photo. B. Ely, 2008.

THE IMAGERY

As described above, the imagery printed on the scrolls and books resembles Chinese calligraphy from the Ming Period called *songti*.¹⁴ This is a plain, formal font-style reflecting the dispassionate voice of authority, and shares the delicacy and precision of brushed calligraphy without its emotional signature (Fig 8).



Fig 6: (Left) The printing often has a haptic quality from an unevenness of pressure, or the application of the ink. (Right) An edge of the block the 'characters' are carved from is sometimes accidentally printed – see the mark, upper left side.

Photo. B. Ely, 2008.

The printing process however is haptic in character because, although great skill was applied to produce even inking and pressure on the tiny woodblocks carved by Xu Bing, slight

¹⁴ <http://www.hanshan.com/specials/xubingts.html>

irregularities produced tonal variation in places, and an edge of a block is sometimes printed. For these reasons the manual process of printing is visible in the work (*Fig 6*).



Fig 7: Wooden blocks racked for printing.

The woodblocks were assembled by hand onto trays to be printed (*Fig 7*). On the scrolls there is some repetition of the arrangements of ‘type’. Xu Bing, when asked about the role of chance and repetition in the assemblage of his ‘characters’, described the process as follows:

Xu Bing: Some scrolls are very repetitious, some scrolls probably changing a lot. ... Part of it was [thought] about, part was random. For example, some words maybe I carved two, three of them to look like in English, [for example] ‘yes’ or ‘of’ - in English they always repeat. Some busy, some simple, pretty like ancient, or official Chinese writing system. Some are, for example, title words, some page words, something I chose, you know. But while I was working on them, each wooden block on the back side would have a mark, So first time I’m making a book, there would be some marks there. So the printers they follow the marks [drawing a diagram].



Fig 8: The 'characters' are "busy" and "simple".

Photo. B. Ely, 2008..

Of the different sized 'characters' Xu Bing said:

The little ones are especially for the notes. In ancient Chinese books, they have a lot of small words that explain about the sentence, right? After the sentence, or after some words, they put some small words like notes. Like footnotes, yes. ... You read the book and put some notes in here. ... In China they re-issue the book, including the famous people's notes.

Bonita Ely: Yes, like a commentary?

(00:40:50) Xu Bing: Yes yes, commentary.

THE SCROLLS

The scrolls are printed with compositions of Xu Bing's 'calligraphy' in rectangular blocks of potentially four hundred and six 'characters' (fourteen 'characters' across by twenty-nine down). The one scroll examined in the Queensland Art Gallery collection was printed in repeated series of three identical print runs, followed by a another series of three identical runs, then another series of three identical print runs (*Fig 9*).¹⁵

The 'text' is framed by a border along both sides of the scroll and its size and rows copy that of a classic manuscript.

¹⁵ For conservation reasons only one scroll was examined and only a section of it was unrolled. The photographs are taken without professional lighting, a flash or tripod, so the images are distorted and the colour inaccurate.

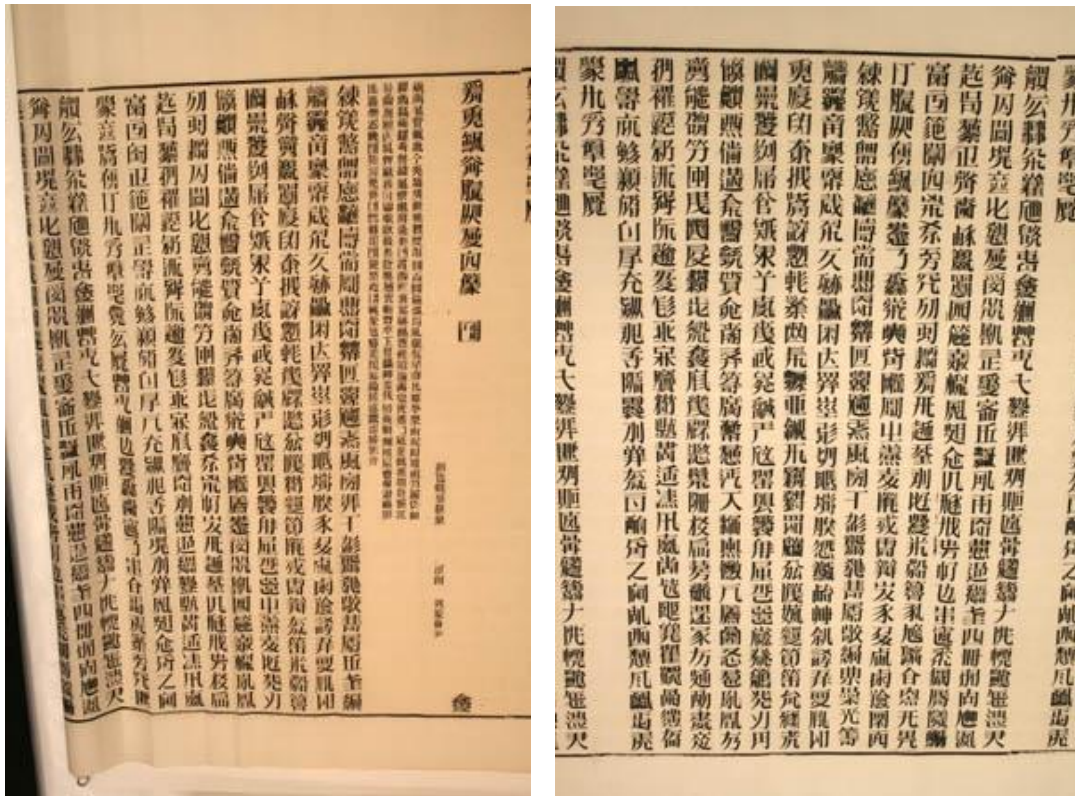


Fig 9: Borders along the length of the scrolls frame the 'text', which is composed differently using different sizes in printed sequences, mimicking traditional scholarly manuscripts. Photo. B. Ely, 2008.

To hang the canopy, the scroll's printed paper is secured simply to a length of wooden dowel, with eye hooks at each end (Fig 10).



Fig 10: Rolled up scroll showing the hanging method. Photo. B. Ely, 2008.

THE POSTERS

Defining the walls of the installation, the posters are reminiscent of Chinese outdoor newspapers, and are printed using the movable type method described above. In an earlier version of *Book from the Sky* in 1988 Xu Bing printed his 'calligraphy' onto pages of the most popular Beijing newspaper, *The Peoples Daily* (Fig 11).¹⁶

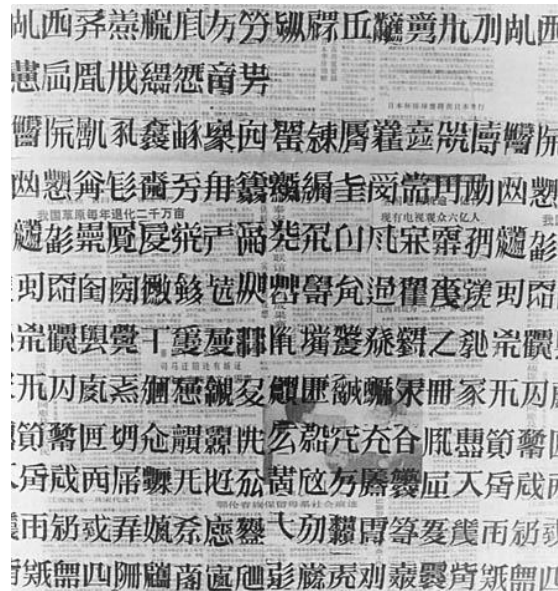


Fig 11: A detail of a poster printed on the *Peoples Daily* newspaper, 1988.

THE TITLE

The title for *Book from the Sky* went through several permutations that reflect Xu Bing's evolving perception of the work. At first he called it, *An Analyzed Reflection of the World – the Final Volume of the Century* (*Xi shi jian – shiji mo juan*), also translated as *The Mirror of the World – An Analyzed Reflection of the End of this Century*. Both translations have an apocalyptic feeling, and certainly reflect Xu Bing's expression of Chinese traditional culture undergoing a massive upheaval. Not long after the artwork was shown to the public it became known as *Book from the Sky*, or *Book from Heaven*, which refers to heaven as symbolic of nothingness in the Taoist canon; the 'words' from the sky in the artwork signifying nothing.¹⁷

BACKGROUND¹⁸

Xu Bing's earlier artworks reveal the beginnings of his critical approach to the history of Chinese tradition, so evident in *Book from the Sky*, along with his desire to make art relevant

¹⁶ Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* (2003). Pub. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press. Pp 51.

¹⁷ Ibid. P 38, 39.

¹⁸ Information from Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the Birth of the Avant-Garde in New China* (2006). Pub Zurich : Scalo ; New York : Distributed in North America by Prestel. Chapter, *Xu Bing: in a Word*, Pp 311 – 357. Also, Xu Bing's website <http://www.xubing.com>

to the times and reflective of his experiences. It is well known that *Book from the Sky* was created during the time when China opened up to the outside world after a long period of turbulent isolationism and deprivation, the Cultural Revolution, when Mao Tse Tung attempted an enforced, chaotic, industrialisation of China's economy, and the obliteration of its traditional culture. Xu Bing's childhood had been spent in the intellectual milieu of Beijing University where his father, who taught him calligraphic writing, was a Professor of History. His mother worked in the Department of Library Sciences. His school, where he was instructed by demoted university lecturers was on the university campus. At first, after witnessing the humiliation of his 'reactionary' family, as the "bastard son of a reactionary father" he attempted to redeem himself working in the Propaganda Office using his 'pen as a weapon'. In 1974 at the age of nineteen, he was sent to the country to work as a labourer for two years where, using his education and calligraphic skills, he and other students from Beijing published a community newsletter.¹⁹ He also began sketching his experiences and experimenting with calligraphy for festivals and ceremonies at the behest of the illiterate peasants.²⁰ Through these means he began to build a reputation as an exceptional student of art.²¹

He returned to Beijing in 1977 having been accepted into the May Seventh College of Arts as a peasant applicant.²² Mao died in 1976 and the Cultural Revolution ended. Xu Bing devoured as much classic Chinese literature as he could in the Beijing University library, and translations of material from the West. It was a confusing time to be an avid reader. During the Cultural Revolution Mao Zedong revised the writing system, simplifying some characters, discarding old characters, then revising the simplifications and bringing back into use some old characters. This disorder struck at the foundations of China's cultural certainty. Central to all learning in China is a reverence for the book, *shou*, and the "cultural conditioning" of mastering the brush to write calligraphy, memorising by rote learning thousands of characters.²³ This experience of a disassembling of knowledge became the inspiration for *Book from the Sky*.²⁴

¹⁹ http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1975/cultural_revolution_magazine

²⁰ From Xu Bing, *The Living Word*, translated by Ann L. Huss, from Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* (2003). Pub. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press. Pp 14 – 16. For an account of his experiences in Huapen Commune, see P 22.

²¹ Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the Birth of the Avant-Garde in New China* (2006). Pub Zurich : Scalo ; New York : Distributed in North America by Prestel. P 325.

²² May Seventh College of Arts reverted to its previous name, the Central Academy of Fine Arts after Mao's death.

²³ Xu Bing, *To Frighten Heaven and Earth and Make the Spirits Cry*.

http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/texts/to_frighten_heaven_and_earth_and_make_the_spirits_cry/

²⁴ Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* (2003). Pub. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press. Pp 22 – 25.

in 1977, Xu Bing honoured the hard working peasants with whom he had lived in a series of greatly admired student prints (*Fig 12*). His woodblock prints depicted rural landscapes, humble abodes, domesticated animals and farmers at work.²⁵ Xu Bing's title for this work, *Broken Jade*, foreshadows his installation, *Book from the Sky*, in that it critiques the weight of China's ancient culture and the currency of the symbolism of the gemstone, jade, which is associated with the privilege of the Emperor and aristocracy along with preciousness, beauty, love and virtue. To call such sincere imagery depicting the humble lives of peasants, *Broken Jade*, creates an ironically metamorphic zone of Taoist dimensions between a homage to the rural poverty and the extreme hardship he had witnessed, a reference to the breakdown of the symbols of ancient power structures in Communist China and perhaps, a critical commentary on the demise of precious aspects of Chinese culture in rural China.²⁶



Fig 12: (Left) Magazine from Xu Bing's teenage years in the country during the Cultural Revolution. The magazine is called *Brilliant Mountain Flowers*. (Right) A woodcut print from the *Broken Jade* series.

During Xu Bing's Masters studies in the mid 1980s, Premier Deng Xiaoping opened China to the West and a loosening of Communist Party ideology began. Chinese artists encountered for the first time the work of contemporary Western artists such as Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, and books such as Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* after which Germano Celant had named the Italian avant-garde installation art movement, *Arte Povera*.²⁷ This publication emphasizes audience participation and confrontation as a methodology in

²⁵ http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1977/broken_jade

²⁶ Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the Birth of the Avant-Garde in New China* (2006). Pub Zurich : Scalco ; New York : Distributed in North America by Prestel. See pp 326 – 330 for an excellent account of Xu Bing's student artwork prior to beginning *Book for the Sky*.

²⁷ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968). Pub. Simon and Shuster, New York. Grotowski's theatre put into practice many of Antonin Artaud's ideas from *The Theatre of Cruelty* discussed in Chapter Two. Ref. Rick Segreda, *Jerzy Grotowski and Antonin Artaud: Between Heaven and Hell*. <http://members.tripod.com/%7Efilmtraveler/Grotowski.htm>

contemporary theatre. Young artists began experimenting with different forms of art practice, including installation art.²⁸ For Xu Bing this allowed an intellectual engagement with traditional processes as a contemporary vehicle for his insights on the “events and tendencies”²⁹ in society and politics taking place around him.

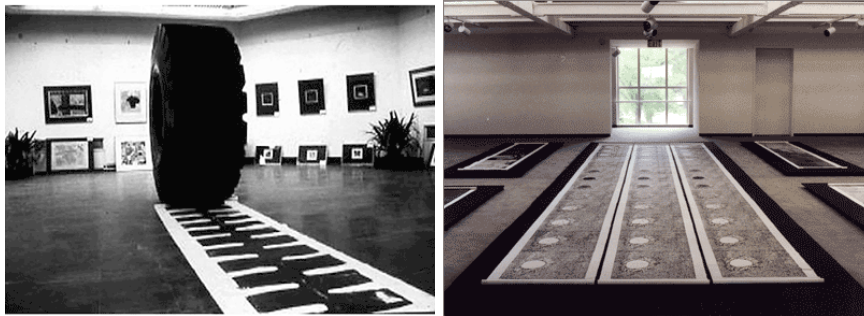


Fig 13: (Left) Xu Bing, *Big Tyre* (1987), where Xu Bing, helped by his students, made a print using the tread of a huge industrial tyre. (Right) *Five Series of Repetition* (1987), an installation that exhibits wood block prints on the ground plane, revealing the process of printmaking by printing imagery from a wood block in stages, to show its surface is gradually carved away to make a blank.

The artwork, *Big Tyre* or *Big Wheel* (1987), created during his first year employed as a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts, made a mechanical tread mark across a long paper ‘terrain’ of alternating black rectangles with balancing white spaces along an axis. Xu Bing’s artwork was a collaborative activity with his students – shoulders to the wheel, many small elements combining to make a unified whole as in Taoist philosophy (*Fig 13*). One person cannot balance and push this massive, lumbering wheel to stamp a graphic imprint of an industrial equivalent of Taoism’s balancing *yin* and *yang*.³⁰ This change in his practice caused consternation amongst authorities in the Academy.³¹

The lucid mark making deployed in *Five Series of Repetitions* (1987) also alludes to agricultural landscape but using more abstract imagery than *Broken Jade* (*Fig 13*). It depicts fields of shapes of different patterns. As Xu Bing cut away then printed the surface of the

²⁸ http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1986/big_tire

²⁹ Jim Supangkat, from his discussion of definitions of ‘contemporary’ in traditional artwork, quoting Klaus Honnef’s book, *Contemporary Art*, in his article, *Contemporary Art: What/When/Where* (1996), catalogue for the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. Pub. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. P 26.

³⁰ Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* (2003). Pub. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press. P 24, 25.

³¹ Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the Birth of the Avant-Garde in New China* (2006). Pub Zurich : Scalo ; New York : Distributed in North America by Prestel. Pp 331 – 333.

blocks in five stages, he records the obliteration of the artefact to a blank, a *nothingness*. Like *Big Tyre*, this action also has a Taoist structure, a gradual, cosmic dissolution of substance into nothingness expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* as:

Emerging, flourishing, dissolving back again
This is the eternal process of return³²

Xu Bing's large scale exploration of underlying Taoist tropes embedded in Chinese culture in this work shows the ambition of his vision, his absorption of the aesthetic methodology of Western installation art, and his interest in abstract concepts as well as socio-political content, for another apt, political interpretation of this work can also be found in the *Tao Te Ching*:

Sharpen a blade too much
And its edge will soon be lost

In this respect Xu Bing was continuing a lineage of protest through art practice and cultural interaction with the West from the turn of the century to the nineteen thirties in China when, in concert with a controversial leaning towards Western styles of both realism and the experimental approach of modernity such as the work of German Expressionist, Käthe Kollwitz, artists believed art could be a force for social change (page 74).³³ This blending with Western Modernism was supplanted by Social Realism, introduced from the Soviet Union after the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 when Mao's communist regime gained control of China from the Nationalists, and modernist experimentation was suppressed as counter revolutionary. However, in the mid nineteen-eighties with an opening up to the West, these earlier artists were an inspiration to the group of young artists who became known as the New Wave (page 81).³⁴ In 1987, amidst this exciting time of potential political change, Xu Bing began work on *Book from the Sky*. It took four years to complete.

First exhibited to great critical success in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Beijing in February 1989 in an incomplete, preliminary state, *A Book from the Sky* was included in the government-sanctioned group exhibition at Beijing's National Museum, *China/Avant-Garde*. Four months later, the massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen

³² Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 16.

³³ Ralf Crozier, *Post Impressionists in Pre War Shanghai: the Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China* (1993). From *Modernity in Asian Art* (1993). Ed. John Clarke. Pub. Peony Press, Sydney. Pp 135 – 154.

³⁴ Ralph Crozier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: the Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting 1906 – 1951* (1988) University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. Pp 152 - 153. Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the Birth of the Avant-Garde in New China* (2006). Pub Zurich : Scalco ; New York : Distributed in North America by Prestel. P 328 – 329.

Square signaled a return to repression. *Book from the Sky* was condemned as subversive and Xu Bing was described as a 'ghost pounding the walls', an allusion to a folk tale where a traveler wanders around and around like a ghost, bewildered and lost, trying to find a way home, pounding on walls to find a way. Xu Bing, labeled a "bourgeois liberal", was placed under surveillance. He migrated to America in 1990 when offered a position as Honorary Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States of America.³⁵ He returned to China in 2008 having been appointed Vice Chancellor of Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts where he studied and taught during the nineteen-eighties, and now lives and works between New York and Beijing.

BOOK FROM THE SKY: Taoism's Direct Conceptual Influences

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Although there is little discussion in the literature about this seminal work of the influence of Taoism on Xu Bing during his childhood, or discussion of the traditional Taoist content or processes present in *Book from the Sky*, close analysis reveals that, although Taoism as a religion had been banned by the Chinese Communist Party and places of worship destroyed or converted for secular use, Xu Bing was raised in a very traditional community where Taoist philosophical principles were ingrained.³⁶ In his interview he said:

... parents, their friends... or the people around you... they are everyday the routine life... so they are talking, so they are in communication with other people. ... The relationship between, the sense of the relationship ... how they handle the relationship... how they handle the case... you come through any routine work you can get the sense of the traditional way, traditional ideas, traditional style... that's the way we learn the tradition. Even during the Cultural Revolution in China, we broke the tradition BUT we still learn a lot [about] tradition from the routine of life.

As discussed previously, *yin* and *yang* are the key symbols of Taoism, seeing the opposite complementary forces inside all things and entities which lead everything to change toward its opposite (**Error! Reference source not found.**). For both the non-Chinese reading viewer and the reader of calligraphy, *Book from the Sky* presents the theme, 'continuity and change', the paradoxical essence of a Taoist sense of reality. For the viewer who has no understanding of Chinese calligraphy it is stating the obvious to say that the 'text' has no meaning. It is infinitely silent (continuity), yet it clearly exudes the authoritative voice of classical Chinese wisdom through multitudinous 'Chinese characters', small, metamorphic things, (neither this

³⁵ Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* (2003). Pub. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press. P 10.

³⁶ The traditional Chinese culture includes animism, Taoism, Confucianism and Ch'en Buddhism just as Western cultures are an amalgam of animist, Judaic, Christian and scientific traditions.

nor that - change) meshing together to make a unified, silent void. In her thesis, *Radical Emptiness: the Spiritual Experience in Contemporary Art*, Melinda Farris Wortz writes, “mankind’s limitations can become opportunities if one is willing to forsake the certainty of the past”.³⁷ Here the legacy of a continuity from the past is enshrined, yet poetic ambiguity opens its legacy to questions for the future that effect change. As Xu Bing says in the interview:

It made the people think this is ... like the holy book, important book. Why can't I get any meaning from the book? The people, they don't understand, why [has the artist] seriously made the book? Each character ... carved in by themselves, and hand-made prints. Beautiful! Why are they non-sense?³⁸

Opposite types of silence that result from philosophical discourse are defined by Frank J. Hoffman in his article, *Dao and Process*. The first is termed “exploding”, that is, philosophical argument that builds endlessly upon critical thinking that cannot be conclusively proven, and therefore may continue undecided, infinitely. The voice, or text, is reduced to no spoken words in its inconclusiveness.³⁹ The second silence is “implosive”. It can conclude a complete philosophical position, not through the discourse of argument or critical thinking, but through “the implosive process of sagely silence and reversion to silent illumination”.⁴⁰ Xu Bing has achieved a sense of implosive silence in *Book from the Sky* for both readers and non-readers of Chinese calligraphy using the Taoist precept of *wu wei*, wordless teaching, non-action (*Fig 14*). For Chinese readers of calligraphy, as we see below, the *Book from the Sky* is wordless but there are incoherent sounds. This is the wordless teaching related to the pedagogic method of Ch'en Buddhism using koans to challenge the novice's sense of reality, and has its origins in Taoism.

The sage acts without action
And teaches without talking
All things flourish around him⁴¹

For non-readers of Chinese calligraphy, *Book from the Sky* is an inscrutable vision of wisdom. The artwork has the appearance of a silent, sacred space, a solemn temple. In the interview Xu Bing said, “It needed to be big. ... people have [the] idea that something printed out is ... official, ... must have an important meaning. ... I thought of the book to look like a temple”.⁴²

³⁷ Melinda Farris Wortz, *Radical Emptiness: the Spiritual Experience in Contemporary Art* (1990), dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy, Berkley, California. Pub. UMI Dissertation Services. Pp 69 – 70.

³⁸ Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569.

³⁹ Frank J. Hoffman, *Dao and Process*, *Asian Philosophy*, Nov. 2002, Vol. 13, No. 3. Hoffman is citing Godel's Incompleteness Theorem regarding explosive silence. Ref. Michael Detlefsen (1999), Godel in Audi, Robert (editor), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, p 347.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 2.

⁴² Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569.

Xu Bing's "temple" is dignified, serious. However it is a parody of seriousness, of scholarship of officialdom, the continuity of stability. In this respect it is also Taoist in its spirit of egalitarian significance for both readers and non readers - the illiterate peasant, the unknowing Westerner, and the Chinese intellectual are on the same footing in front of the *Book from the Sky*. Xu Bing's conceptual objective signaled the extraordinary changes in China's culture.



Fig 14: Books lying open on the floor.

The *Tao Te Ching* observes:

Heaven and earth coalesce and it rains sweet dew.
The people, no one ordering them, self balance to equality.⁴³

Xu Bing's artwork expresses his belief that art should be 'for the people'.

BOOK FROM THE SKY: For the Reader of Calligraphy

Very little commentary on *Book from the Sky* in the West includes a depth of analysis, in relation to Xu Bing's statements about possible readings of his 'calligraphy', of how the work is perceived by people who can read calligraphy. He has described it as "empty", without "any clear message", a "pretense" and "true absurdity".⁴⁴ However, in two interviews he qualifies this by saying:

⁴³ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 28.

⁴⁴ *Persistence and Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*. 2006. Edited by Jerome Silbergeld: P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Centre for Eastern Art, Princeton University Press. See the interview with Xu Bing, *An Artist's View*, p 99.

I actually used some real Chinese partials or radicals. For example, when I make a fake word, I put the water radical with the radical of the mountain: two radicals together. People see this word, and think it should talk about nature. They think this word should have some meaning, but they cannot read the word aloud. It looks like a familiar face but no title, no name. I use a lot of these quotations in Chinese.⁴⁵

Speculation about Xu Bing's method of invention for this thesis was calibrated upon two aspects of calligraphic text. First, calligraphy, unlike Western text, is based on a visual system where the characters are constructed as amalgamated pictograms that together make a meaning (page 57).⁴⁶ Knowing this, I surmised that there was a possibility that Xu Bing may have used existing pictograms, or radicals, to make some 'characters' using meaningless combinations, or that some of his 'characters' might allude to existing characters in some way so that for readers of calligraphy, the 'text' is encoded with an incoherent silence, rather than a mute silence. Another possibility was that Xu Bing created imagery in the style of calligraphy that would imaginatively elicit a 'reading-like' response from the viewer. In my interview with Xu Bing he was asked to comment on this theory.

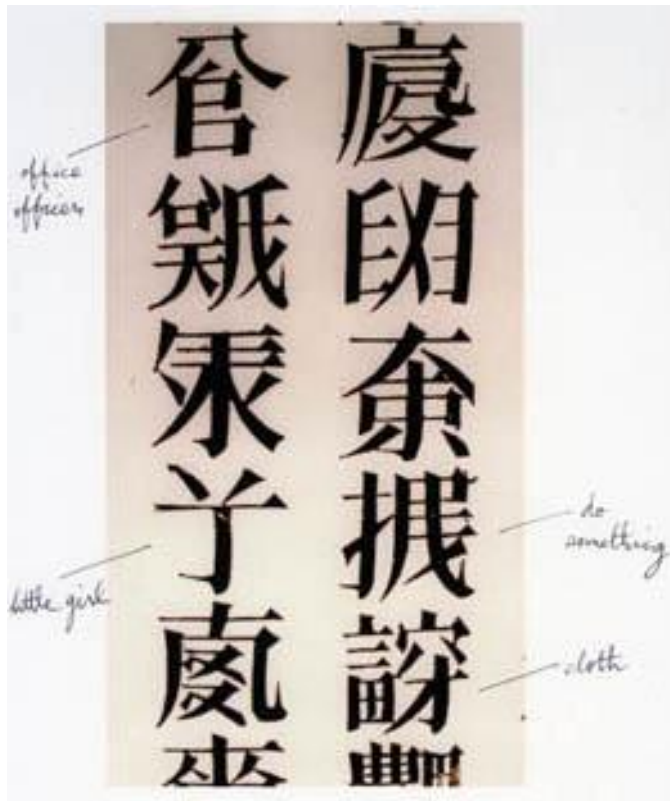
He said that people who read Chinese recognise that some of his invented characters "look like" certain real characters (*Fig 15, Fig 16*). "It's like you see some people's faces [are] really familiar but you couldn't call their name, you don't know their name". Because Chinese writing is based on imagery, the "image is ... working at the same time with the meaning". Pointing to several of his invented characters in a photograph of some of the 'calligraphy' from *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing said, "Reading this – they see this 'word', they look at this artwork, they can get some sense of the image. It gives you some meaning. It LOOKS like this, but they couldn't really CALL it what it is."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid. P 117 This explanation is paraphrased by Xu Bing in my interview with him (see the following paragraph).

⁴⁶ See the Introduction, Chapter Two, and Chapter Four for analysis of Chinese characters.

⁴⁷ Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569.

Fig 15: Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky* (detail). Queensland Art Gallery collection.



Xu Bing pointed out some of his invented characters that “look like” real characters: (top left) officer, or official; (fourth down on left) little girl; (fourth down on right) the verb “do something”; (fifth down on right) cloth. My own investigations into these characters suggest that readers will see different correlations in the same image, for example the ‘character’ Xu Bing relates to “little girl” has also been identified with the ‘character’ meaning ‘male’. These imaginative responses to the invented ‘calligraphy’ indicates how closely related to Taoism’s theory of creativity, characterised by ambiguity, free association and graphic improvisation is Xu Bing’s method (see the characters below).

- 官 officer, or office, or official
- 女 girl, woman (c/f 子 male)
- 指 do something (also ‘middle finger’)
- 布 cloth



Fig 16: Two combined ‘characters’ at the bottom of this image have been identified in Xu Bing’s imagery.

- 九 nine (right)
- 开 open (left)

This recognition of some 'characters' in Xu Bing's imagery demonstrates the conditioning of our mind to find meaning in text.⁴⁸ However, this does not diminish the extraordinary inventiveness of his artwork. Rather, it magnifies a literate viewer's engagement with the Taoist nature of Xu Bing's visceral imagery.

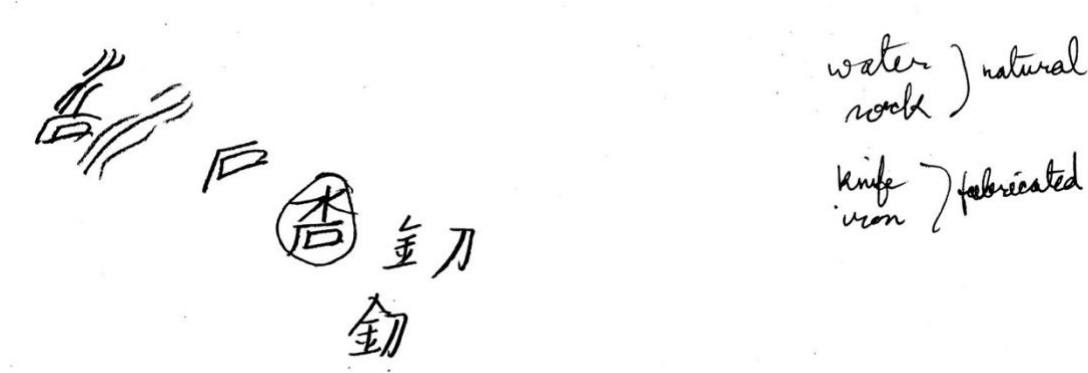


Fig 17 Xu Bing's diagram, drawn during the interview, to show how he invented some 'characters'. (Top left) shows a drawing of water flowing over a rock; (below to the right) the water and rock are abstracted; (third below to the right - circled) a pictogram-like image is added to make the circled 'character'. This method mimics the way actual calligraphy was invented. (Beside that, on the right) an image for iron, on the right, a knife; (below) how they could be put together to make a 'character'. My notes to the far right made during the interview in English.

After some explanation of the history of calligraphy Xu Bing described the way he played with Chinese calligraphy as the equivalent of Western art's "concrete poetry", where meaning inhabits a "grey layer", a mixing together of traditions associated with Chinese writing. Xu Bing said meaning is obliquely alluded to, not clearly defined, as it is in real calligraphy. He said he might put a sign for *water* together with a sign for *rock*, and viewers may see that it alludes to *nature* - "you know it doesn't talk about electronics". Whereas if "a metal with a knife are put together you know it is not talking about nature, it is talking about human made. So I use a lot of that kind, this way, to play with my 'words'" (Fig 17).

Xu Bing further elaborated that communication through his characters is like the Ch'en Buddhist's use of *koan's*, (with their origins in Taoism), to make the student think more deeply.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Persistence and Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*. 2006. Edited by Jerome Silbergeld: P. Y. and Kinmay W. Pub. Tang Centre for Eastern Art, Princeton University Press. See Robert E. Harriste Jr., *Book for the Sky at Princeton: Reflections on Scale, Sense and Sound*, where he discusses this phenomenon known as the *Stroop Interference Effect*, which shows how "literate people have great difficulty ignoring the printed word". P 33.

⁴⁹ *Gong'an* in Chinese. An important agent of Taoist, Ch'en and Zen Buddhist education towards enlightenment, where the student is challenged to use lateral rather than logical thought to find solutions to paradoxical questions. Ref. Helmut Brinker, Hiroshi Kanazawa, Andreas Leisinger. 1996. *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings*. Artibus Asiae. Supplementum Vol. 40. P 14. See Chapter Two also.

Chinese Zen Buddhists, they use [a] way [to] contact, communicate to people, or the way the master lets the students understand something. They are not really directly teaching you what it is. They just talking [about] something [that] really look[s] like it but not relate[d] to the question. They just talking something else and make students really thinking hard.⁵⁰

This device for encoding meaning is discussed in the context of Western experimental poetry in John Calley's essay, *Writing (Under) Sky: On Xu Bing's "Tianshu"*. John Calley calls upon poet, Charles Bernstein's distinction between "absorptive" and "antiabsorptive" writing for insights on Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*. The former, "absorptive" writing, is reading as an artifice that immerses the reader "opening onto signification", the latter is an artifice that confronts and resists both "reading and readability".⁵¹ This is achieved through "extralexical means" where devices such as onomatopoeia, rhythm, typography, line breaks, acrostics, express meaning, such as in poetry. He points to Xu Bing's use of "extra or missing strokes, unrecorded [in Chinese dictionaries] combinations of elements" within entirely canonical forms. In this respect Xu Bing's extra-lexical 'writing' differs from the West's concrete poetry because it disrupts convention, whereas Xu Bing is at great pains to mimic it. Yet it is this mimicry that obfuscates meaning. These paradoxes place the work within the tradition of Taoist thinking where enlightenment, or insight, is achieved through confrontational means, such as using koans as cited by Xu Bing. A fierce questioning of its value for a changing present disrupts the continuation of tradition in China. Yet State imposed values about 'correctness' and 'incorrectness' cannot be applied to the subversive incoherence of *Book for the Sky*, unlike Mao Zedong's revisions of traditional calligraphy (page 10) and his calls to "smash the four olds" – old habits, old customs, old culture, old ideas.⁵²

BOOK FROM THE SKY: For the Non-Reader of Calligraphy

For the viewer who cannot read Chinese calligraphy, it is self evident that the 'text' has no meaning. To the informed viewer the artwork appears like a monument to exceptional creativity and a homage to the traditions of Chinese culture, with the twist that the text had no meaning for literate Chinese either. We enter the installation space, it is hushed, silent, no words disturb our mental absorption of the artwork. It is a silent testament. The work is mute,

⁵⁰ Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569. Christian Monks, in his article *A Visual Koan: Xu Bing's Dynamic Desktop*. *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Art*, Winter, December 2005, writes: "a Chan perspective is present in Xu's practice even when it is not explicit". P 99.

⁵¹ John Calley, *Writing (Under-) Sky: On Xu Bing's "Tianshu"* (1990). This essay was first published (in Italian) in *In Forma de Parole* 1999.1, pp. 143-153; also in English in Jerome Rothenberg and Stephen Clay, eds. *A Book of the Book*, New York: Granary Books, 2000. See: <http://www.shadoof.net/in/ts.html>

⁵² *Persistence and Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*. 2006. Edited by Jerome Silbergeld: P. Y. and Kinmay W. Pub. Tang Centre for Eastern Art, Princeton University Press. See Perry Link, *Whose Assumptions Does Xu Bing Upset and Why?* Pp 49, 55.

bringing to mind the correlations with sound discussed in the introduction to calligraphy, where text is correlated to the embodied voice (page 17).⁵³ Here no sound represents the continuity of the void, the nothingness, at the foundation of all possibilities, all creation, the source of all that exists in Taoist philosophy:

Words and names are not the way
They can't define the absolute
It's better that you look within
Hold your tongue and just be mute

Look within and look out too
You will not find a separation
Out there you see appearance
Within you see origination
Look within with wonder
At emptiness and bliss
For wonder names totality
Where nothing is amiss
The space within is always there
If you can moderate desire
A place of utter emptiness
And possibility entire⁵⁴

Again in Verse 2, Lao Tzu advises us to “stay within the emptiness” to come to our true nature, detached from superficial and transitory life events.

Can you see the vacant place
Where good and bad and sad and merry
Disappear forevermore?
Where nothing ever is contrary

So stay within the emptiness
Unless you rise you never fall
Accepting that which comes your way
You are forever all in all⁵⁵

Xu Bing's created text-like imagery represents an abundance of changing phenomena, the richness of creativity and creation, Lao Tzu's *one thousand things* of nature, the Tao is the source, where we may find a true sense of reality. This reading also ties into Zen Buddhist principles, to which Xu Bing does not profess any alliance, but he sees Ch'en, or Zen Buddhism as a way [method, *fang fa*] to live life:

For example, Zen Buddhist by my idea, it is not really Buddhist. It is not really a philosophy. It is one kind of life's idea about life... *fang fa*, about the life.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ref. Jean Francois Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*, 1990, Skira Rizzoli International Publications, NY. P 90.

⁵⁴ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 1.

⁵⁵ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 2.

⁵⁶ Bonita Ely's interview with Xu Bing, 3/10/2008, Beijing. Protocol #H6569.

In the ways described above, *Book from the Sky* conceptually embodies the Taoist precepts 'continuity and change' as the basis of reality in both Taoism and Zen Buddhism, and expressed in the structure of installation art.

IMPROVISATION

To elaborate upon the discussion above, the Taoist tradition of improvising upon the common form of a Chinese character discussed in Chapter Three, is the method used for Xu Bing's invention of 'characters'. *Book from the Sky* falls within this Taoist genre. Using Karl E. Weick's categorisation of graded degrees of improvisation,⁵⁷ the process of graphic improvisation upon the form of Chinese characters in Xu Bing's artwork exemplifies true improvisation, rather than "variations". Like the artists who played with the form of the longevity character, Xu Bing radically alters traditional form to make entirely new 'characters' from his imagination, scholarship and the properties of the woodblock print medium. Here Xu Bing's improvised, changed, version of calligraphy's continuing form has departed so far from the common form it is unreadable as text, yet, because of a familiarity with this tradition, the Eastern and non-Eastern viewer both can interpret Xu Bing's imaginative, speculative, contextualisation of that tradition.

BOOK FROM THE SKY: Indirect Influences of Taoism

INSTALLATION ART

During the early years of China's open door policy to the West, beginning in the mid nineteen-eighties, Xu Bing and his fellow artists were exposed for the first time to information about contemporary art from Europe and America, including the relatively new art form, installation art. Xu Bing's *Big Tyre* and *Five Series of Repetitions* from 1987 are believed to be among the first installations to be seen in China.⁵⁸

It is serendipitous yet predictable in some ways that Xu Bing's installation, *Book from the Sky*, resembles aspects of Donald Judd's artwork in the artillery sheds in Marfa (*Fig 18*). Both artists activated the ground plane by placing objects in a formal grid pattern, yet subverted this order with visual confusion, a Taoist paradox. Both artists deployed Taoism's improvisational methodology, Xu Bing to create imagery, Judd to create form and spatiality. Their artworks

⁵⁷ Karl E. Weick's Introductory Essay, *Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis*, for the *Special Issue: Jazz Improvisation and Organizing*. *Organisation Science*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (Sept. – Oct.). Pp 543 – 555

⁵⁸ Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* (2003). Pub. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press. P 28.

shift and change notwithstanding the stasis of the material elements. Both artworks define or are defined by the spatiality of temple-like rooms.



Fig 18: Comparison shows similarities between the formal, symmetrical spatiality of a ceremonial hall in Beijing's Forbidden City, and the temple-like spatiality of Judd's *Untitled* at Marfa and Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*.

However indirectly endowed, arguably this commonality has its origins in the Taoist processes and tropes evident in both artworks. Installation art, as discussed in depth in the chapters Chapter Two: A History of Discourse – East West and Back Again, Chapter Four: Taoist Calligraphy, and Chapter Five: 100 Oblongs: One Thing After Another, continues the architectural provenance of articulating a relationship between the encoded context, or venue, and the spatial placement of artefacts or objects, exemplified by Taoist Chinese garden art and the calligraphic adornment of architecture in Hué. Perhaps Xu Bing's easy adoption of installation art can be directed to his intrinsic knowledge of Taoist architecture, Tao and Ch'en Buddhist temples and the Taoist *feng shui* of traditional Chinese gardens. Here, in *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing has created his own spatial venue and context from the fabric of the artwork itself, whereas Judd refined an existing venue to house his fabrications. Xu Bing's imagery is a shifting, ambiguous feast not because of its materiality, like Judd's reflective surfaces exposed to diurnal changes, but because of the uneasy inter-relationship he achieved between deceptive familiarity and unexpected obfuscation. Viewers of both works are led on a journey like a walking meditation to investigate the multifarious aspects of the artworks, their perceptions heightened, their intellect challenged by the conceptual complexity, intrigued by the artists' prolific invention.

In summary, this chapter locates the traditional context of Xu Bing's artwork, *Book from the Sky* in China's ingrained Taoist culture, identifying the embedded processes and concepts derived from Taoist philosophy and art forms. This contributes to the literature surrounding this artwork the fundamental origins of these forms in Taoism, which, to now, have not been analysed. A further contribution is the origins in Taoism of Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, as a Western art form that has been indirectly, and directly influenced by Taoism. The interpretation

in the literature of the artwork from the perspective of readers of calligraphy has also been clarified from a contemporary perspective as a form comparable to the West's concrete poetry. In the context of the artwork's underlying Taoist thematic content, its sense of metaphysical reality simultaneously embodies both continuity, tradition, and change, improvisation.

In the following chapter the quickening pace of intercultural, global amalgamations of Eastern and Western cultures since Judd completed *Untitled* in the artillery sheds Marfa in 1986, and Xu Bing completed *Book from the Sky* in 1991, will be examined in the art work produced during the candidacy from 2002 to 2008. The focus of the chapter is to demonstrate how Taoism's rhizomic influences flow back and forth from East Asia and the West, seamlessly embedded in experimental, contemporary art practice.