Xu Bing: calligraphy, language and interpretation

COLLETTE CHATTOPADHYAY

Radical departures in English in the work of a Chinese calligrapher

CHALLENGING conventional assumptions regarding the use of language, Xu Bing's calligraphic artworks of the early 1990s address the English-speaking world from a space deep within the bedrock of Chinese culture. Ironically extending and querying the continued relevance of the Chinese calligraphic tradition in a post-Mao, post-modern, trans-cultural era, Xu's *New English Calligraphy* cloaks English words in Chinese form. Exploring the communicative functions of language, these works examine the relation between linguistic intent and subsequent understanding or misunderstanding.

Introduction

A major figure in the emergence of Chinese New Wave art in the late 1980s, Xu Bing, in his early art work *A Book from the Sky*, addressed the relation of the past to the present, investigating the relation of Chinese calligraphy to mainland China's artistic, cultural and political history. Born into the intelligentsia, but coming of age during the Chinese cultural revolution, when the social role of art was redefined in Chinese society at large,[1] Xu emerged on the international art scene with a honed instinct for recognizing art's political dimensions and implications.

XU BING was born in Chongqing, China in 1955 and raised in Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution he laboured for two years in the Northern Chinese countryside. When he returned to Beijing in 1977, he enrolled in the Central Academy of Fine Art, receiving an MFA in 1987. After the Tiananmen Square massacre he moved to the US in 1990 and he currently lives in New York City. The many exhibitions, museums, and galleries that have shown his work include: the 45th Venice Biennial; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte, Madrid; the Institute of Contemporary Art, London; the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki; the National Gallery, Prague; the Johannesburg Biennale; the Sydney Biennale; the Taipei Fine Arts Museum; the Intercommunication Center, Tokyo; the Shanghai Art Museum; the National Museum, Ottawa; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Awards include the MacArthur Award (the US, Jul 99) in recognition of his 'originality, creativity, self-direction, and capacity to contribute importantly to society', the Fukuoka Arts and Culture Prize (Japan, Nov 2003), and the Artes Mundi Visual Arts Prize (the Welsh Assembly, BBC Wales).

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DOI: 10.1017/S0266078405001033
English Today 81, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 2005). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2005 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078405001033 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A result of studying the nexus between political nationalism and art, Xu's works reappraise the contemporary validity of calligraphy, an art form which traditionally demands a reading knowledge of at least seven different Chinese scripts, a seasoned acquaintance with historically revered authors, and knowledge of famous Chinese calligraphers and their aesthetic accomplishments.

In particular, his work evidences an acute awareness of the potential meanings implicit to calligraphy which (in spite of and because of its shared allusions to history, literature, and art) can slip beyond the didactic narrative of a word or phrase to wider fields of connotation and innuendo. Intentionally, even wryly, side-stepping the delimited scope of meaning that was endemic to the Cultural Revolution's Big Character political posters, Xu's art of the last fifteen years usually clusters nuances and implications, multiplying meaning.

This study explores three major bodies of Xu's work, which probe the relation of calligraphy to linguistic and artistic practices. It investigates how these artworks (which parlay a skepticism that resonates with both Chan Buddhism and European post-structuralism) challenge certainties regarding the use of language to catalyze communication and understanding.

The works to be discussed include Xu's seminal, groundbreaking 1988 *Book from the Sky*, an ongoing series of *New English Calligraphy* scrolls begun in 1990, and an evolving *Computer Font Project* begun in 1998. Collectively these art works redress calligraphy's historical emphases on epigrams, language purity, and expressive brushstrokes, finding other validating criteria for this ancient art form. While broadly reevaluating inherited rubrics, Xu's works simultaneously expose the twined relations between politics, culture, and calligraphy, focusing in particular on how language functions to define national and global identities.

Tianshu 'Book from the Sky'

Profiling a set of four books along with an array of hanging scrolls 'printed with more than a thousand different characters which Xu Bing invented'[2], *Book from the Sky* shook the post-Mao Beijing art scene in 1988 when first exhibited. While bearing a close resemblance to known Chinese scripts, the compendium of created books and scrolls remains to this day illegible, barring interpretations based on textual analysis or reading. The installation thus attempts to shift emphasis from a focus on the conceptual qualities of calligraphy to its physical, material essence.

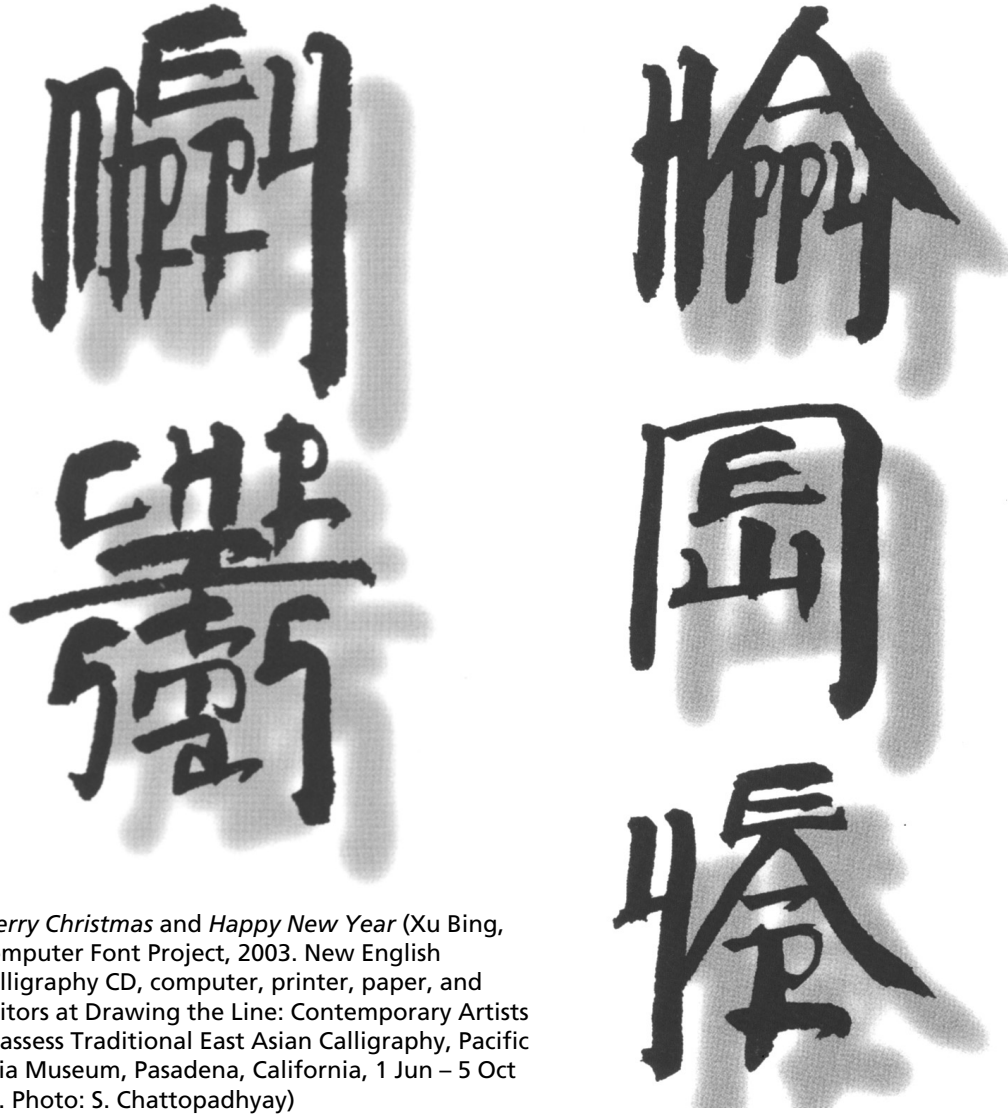
Blocking paths to narrative interpretations, in a manner akin to Buddhist *koans* or riddle-challenges, this work encourages its audience to side-step rational approaches to calligraphy in order to arrive at a deeper truth than what might be embodied within an ancient, revered epigram. While the work was originally entitled *An Analyzed Reflection of the World – The Final Volume of the Century* (*Xi shi jian – shiji mo juan*), or *The Mirror of the World – An Analyzed Reflection of the End of this Century*, it came to be known as the *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* reflecting viewer interpretations of the work as an 'unintelligible text sent down from heaven'[3].

Encouraging the acceptance of a suspended or deferred reading of the calligraphic text, the meaning of the work thus emerged in relation to an imagined story of its alleged antiquity that was fostered through such physical attributes as its traditional calligraphic format, materials, and conventions. Silently conversing with the historical *literati* models and methods, the *Book from the Sky* established authenticity by invoking a visual resemblance to tradition, even while thwarting calligraphy's most direct, communicative functions. In this manner, Xu's first magnum opus validated what was initially a questionable work of calligraphy.

Further, his invention of an unknown, pseudo-ancient script served to establish new themes in calligraphy, proposing that language and even the tradition of calligraphy itself are arbitrary, culturally engendered systems that use established repertories of signs to express ideas. Challenging the concreteness, certainty, and clarity deemed the privilege of words, *Book from the Sky* multiplies meaning visually rather than condensing or distilling it verbally. At the same time, it toys with the alleged necessity of following historical antecedents, parodying particularly the guarded privileges of wisdom shared amongst a select few, extending Mao's belief that art and literature should serve the masses, not just the social elite.

Of course, the work can also be interpreted as audaciously presenting a pseudo-relic that supersedes known ancient models, that aspires to the status of being a calligraphic artifact from some long-forgotten immortal past. In either case, the work daringly spoofs the power

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Merry Christmas and *Happy New Year* (Xu Bing, Computer Font Project, 2003. New English Calligraphy CD, computer, printer, paper, and visitors at Drawing the Line: Contemporary Artists Reassess Traditional East Asian Calligraphy, Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, 1 Jun – 5 Oct 03. Photo: S. Chattopadhyay)

and structure of language by presenting pseudo-calligraphic characters that skewer the verbal with the visual.

Xu Bing's 'New English Calligraphy'

Over time the Chinese calligraphic tradition evolved seven major Chinese scripts.[4] In the modern era, even Mao instituted 'a new type of … abbreviated characters (*jiantizi*)',[5] in an attempt to make the learning and reading of Chinese more accessible to the masses. Xu's pseudo-calligraphic scripts wryly extend such historical precedences, building towards the future while acknowledging the past.

Book from the Sky was Xu's first work to address this complex legacy. Following his relocation in 1990 to the United States, he invented a second script which came to be known as *New English Calligraphy*, fusing letters of the English alphabet with the formal structure of Chinese Regular Script (*kai shu*), ostensibly transforming Chinese characters into English words. Writing in reality a language that is neither Chinese nor English, but rather a fusion of both, *New English Calligraphy* thwarts the traditional expectations of both linguistic audiences, effectively integrating selected visual signs gleaned from both languages to ultimately address the utopian dreams and dystopian foibles of cross-cultural communication.

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Single-handedly over a period of years, Xu produced a vast body of hand-written *New English Calligraphy* texts which variously profile epigrams from respected Chinese- and English-language authors. The resulting scrolls variously cite in whole or in part poetry by Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams or portions of Mao Zedong's lectures on literature and art originally presented at the Yan'an Forum in 1942.

On a formal level, *New English Calligraphy* wryly adapts the systemic modularity of traditional written Chinese. As Lothar Ledderose explains, 'all characters [of Chinese calligraphy] are built from distinct, interchangeable parts'.[6] For example, 'the philologist Xu Shen canonized a repertoire of 540 components of the [ancient] Seal Script in a dictionary presented in AD 100 entitled *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi*)'.[7] Subsequent dynasties trimmed the modular components further in a process that can be conceptually traced to the abbreviated system of characters implemented under Mao's regime.

For *New English Calligraphy*, Xu used the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet humorously, making them the most drastically reduced modular version of Chinese to date. He then proceeded to write English words as Chinese-looking characters, adapting for his newly minted script the square-block format traditionally used to teach Chinese characters and writing. He then wrote selected epigrams to read from top to bottom in the traditional Chinese fashion, but organized columns to read from left to right in reverse of Chinese tradition, as a talisman of his alchemical processes or perhaps out of deference to the presumed English-language readers.

Whereas the words written in the *Book from the Sky* are completely unreadable, the *New English Calligraphy* works are intelligible to any audience willing to meet the artist in a linguistic space between two cultural spheres. The theoretician Homi Bhabha has defined such conceptual territories as a third space where the former certainties of hierarchical nationalistic worlds are replaced with a cultural ambivalence characteristic of contemporary *inter*cultural identities.[8] By emphasizing language and employing leitmotivs that bear lingering traces of nationalistic specificity, Xu brings faddish discussions of global identity into sharp focus, underscoring the complexities involved in the reconfiguration of inherently nationalistic artistic and cultural identities.

While some have perceived these works as a positive social force that dares to introduce, foster, and encourage a cross-cultural appreciation of Chinese calligraphy and literature in the English-speaking world, others have criticized the *New English Calligraphy* scrolls as culturally corrosive, because they unravel formerly revered artistic cultural traditions and heritage. There are also those that may view these works as an artistic Chinglish, or pidgin English, such as that identified as being spoken in China and Hong Kong, and used in email and on select internet sites. Even more acerbic are those who mock *New English Calligraphy* as an art that panders to Western hegemonic aspirations.[9]

Both interpretations fail to recognize the terrains into which this art steps. *New English Calligraphy* is more cultured and knowing than these interpretations acknowledge; it adapts and transforms the legacy of written Chinese, which historically permitted cross-cultural communication among the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans. Similar to this practical and esteemed function of traditional Chinese calligraphy, Xu's *New English Calligraphy* permits and promotes cross-cultural communication among people who speak different languages. It was this function of the work, as an arbitrator of social exchange, that gave rise to Xu's recognition as a MacArthur Foundation recipient in 1998.

The issue as to whether these works are to be interpreted as symbols of cultural loss or gain, erosion or progress is a judgment premised in valuations determined in relation to the changing parameters of the shrinking global environment. The cultural conundrums raised by Xu's works are ultimately philosophical, social, and political, questioning whether the premises of the past remain adequate to answer the needs of the present or whether, to paraphrase the Chan master Xu Yun, one can never step into the same river twice, for its current is always renewed and different.[10]

The Computer Font Project

Begun in 2001, the Computer Font Project transforms New English Calligraphy from a hand-written to a computer-processed text. In doing so, Xu raises the problematic issue of the continued relevance of hand-written documents in the age of technological reproduction.

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Translating hand-drafted New English Calligraphy characters into computer codes, the Computer Font Project both preserves and mutates calligraphy as it has been historically practiced in China. Rather than being created by the artist working with focused attention in front of a sheet of paper or silk, the computerized version of *New English Calligraphy* appears with the tap of a computer key. Created in association with the Cori Japanese software company, this artwork and its computer-printed characters diminish the expressive innuendoes of hand-brushed characters but increase communicability by means of standardization.

In downplaying the significance of gestured expression in calligraphy, the Computer Font Project returns to the questions of meaning encountered in the *Book from the Sky*. Whereas in the earlier work the semantics of language were underscored as pre-eminent, with the computer-typed font it is the syntax of language that becomes most significant. Eradicating the gestured, physical variations and innuendoes which have been a preeminent theme explored by such experimental calligraphers as Gu Wenda, Zhang Dawo, and Qin Feng, among others, Xu's Computer Font Project permits the creation of a perfected and ideal calligraphic script each time a word or sentence is composed.

Ironically, the perfection inherent to writing *New English Calligraphy* can be achieved by anyone willing to sit at a computer programmed with the Computer Font Project, irrespective of such former demands as years of rigorous calligraphy practice, repetition, and study to accomplish correct character placement and form on paper. Rather than extending the arduous training of the *literati*, the Computer Font Project dares to create a script that can be easily used 'by the people'. Symbolically then, this artwork transfers the social power implicit in writing to the world's working class, fulfilling Mao's injunctive to 'create art for the masses'.

At the same time, Xu also moves beyond Mao's injunction and vision for China and its people, by providing a calligraphy for the peoples of the English-speaking world who, like the Chinese masses, are herewith granted entry to what was formerly privileged terrain shared by a select few Chinese. Moving beyond a nationalistic vision for China, Xu sets his sights on the world's political problems, exploring calligraphy's potential contribution to intercultural dialogues and understanding.

Conclusion

Whether inventing illegible characters that command attention because of their impeccable execution and skeptical philosophy, or creating a Chinese-English calligraphic script that attracts interest because of its experimental, cross-cultural linguistic nature, or generating a work that shifts calligraphic characters from being hand-written to computer-typed, Xu Bing's calligraphy simultaneously acknowledges the continued power of regional art dialogues while it explores the possibilities of intercultural communication. Raising challenging questions regarding the continued viability of art and calligraphy as it has been regionally practised and upheld for centuries, his works intone the changing configurations of art in relation to mass media culture and contemporary modes of communication. Using language as a marker of cultural identity his characters unfold challenging questions regarding the possibility of stepping beyond the traditional hegemonic nature of calligraphy, language, and culture. ■

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Meher McArthur, Curator of East Asian Art, Pacific Asian Museum, Pasadena, California, who first suggested I consider writing about the use of English in Xu Bing's art. I also wish to thank both Meher McArthur and David Kamansky, Emeritus Director and Senior Chief Curator of Asian Art, Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, for inviting me to guest-curate a contemporary exhibition at the museum which became known as *Drawing the Line: Contemporary Artists Reassess Traditional East Asian Calligraphy*. The show (1 June to 5 October 03) included both Xu Bing's New English Calligraphy scrolls and his Computer Font Project station. The illustrations used in this issue of *ET* were created at that station.

Notes

1 Cf his quotations from Chairman Mao, calligraphy scroll, Xu Bing; 2001. Exhibited at the Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, 1 Jun 1–5 Oct 03, quoting Mao Zedong, *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, 23 May 23–42, in a passage that read, 'The rich legacy ... in literature and art… handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries… must... serve the masses of the people.'
2 B. Erickson, *Xu Bing: Word without Meaning, Meaning without Words.* Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution and Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001. 33 pages.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078405001033 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3 B. Erickson, p. 39
4 C. Y. Fu Shen, former Senior Curator of Chinese art at the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., outlined the historical scripts as: Oracle-bone script (*jiaguwen*), Bronze script (*jinwen*), Large Seal Script and Small Seal Script (*zhuan shu*), Clerical script (*li shu*), Regular script (*kai shu*), Running, or semi-cursive script (*xing shu*), and Cursive script (*cao shu*) in 1994. His summary of these developments appears in G. Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China* (London: The British Museum Press, 2002), p. 19.
5 L. Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 21.
6 Ledderose, p. 20.
7 Ledderose, p. 20.
8 H. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge, 1994.
9 N. Wang, 'Why we should criticize Xu Bing's New English Calligraphy and acknowledge Liu Chao's Machine Calligraphy' (Chinese-art.com Online, 2001; 4(2), pp. 1–5. Cited by Doran V. Xu Bing, *A Logos for the Genuine Experience.* <http://www.kaleden.com/articles/3245.html> Accessed 9 Nov 02.
10 Teachings of Xu Yun. Ch. 1. <http://www.jcrows.com/XuYunTeachings.html > Accessed 5 Jul 04

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