

Research Article

Exploring the Dilemmas of Cultural Communication Through Xu Bing's Calligraphy

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Abstract

This article explores the dilemmas of cultural communication through the lens of Xu Bing's groundbreaking calligraphic art. Chinese calligraphy, rooted in the unique structure of Chinese characters, serves as both a visual and cultural symbol, traditionally valued for its abstract beauty and expressive potential. Xu Bing's art, especially his *New English Calligraphy* and works such as *Book from the Sky* and *A Case Study of Transference*, innovatively combines Eastern and Western elements, challenging the conventional boundaries of language and culture. By deconstructing and reconstructing written language, Xu Bing addresses issues of cultural identity, miscommunication, and globalisation, creating artworks that invite diverse audiences to reconsider the role and meaning of text. His practice reflects not only a critique of cultural ideology but also a methodological transformation required by contemporary society. Through the transformation and fusion of artistic languages, Xu Bing's work exemplifies how art can serve as a bridge across cultures, fostering dialogue and understanding in an increasingly globalised world.

Keywords

Xu Bing, Chinese Calligraphy, Cultural Communication, Contemporary Calligraphy, Contemporary Art

1. Introduction

Xu Bing is a pioneering Chinese contemporary artist whose work deconstructs language and cultural identity through innovative calligraphy and text-based art. Emerging from China's Cultural Revolution, his early experiences with propaganda and traditional script deeply influenced his artistic practice [1]. His seminal *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991)—featuring thousands of invented, unreadable characters—challenges the authority of written language while reflecting post-Mao China's ideological uncertainty [23].

After relocating to the U.S. in 1990, Xu Bing expanded his exploration of cross-cultural communication. Works like

Square Word Calligraphy (1994–1996) hybridise English and Chinese writing systems, exposing the fluidity of linguistic meaning. Later pieces, such as *The Character of Characters* (2012), use digital animation to reinterpret calligraphy's expressive potential [3]. Through these experiments, Xu Bing transforms script into a site of philosophical inquiry, questioning how meaning is constructed, transmitted, and lost across cultures. His art invites viewers to reconsider the boundaries between legibility and abstraction, tradition and innovation, ultimately revealing language as an ever-shifting medium of human connection and miscommunication.

This article examines Xu Bing's artistic evolution, focusing

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on how his manipulation of language challenges conventional understandings of communication, tradition, and cultural identity. By analysing key works—from the subversion of *Book from the Sky* to the intercultural experiments of *Square Word Calligraphy*, *A Case Study of Transference* and animated calligraphy of *The Character of Characters*, this article explores how Xu Bing's art destabilizes fixed meanings, inviting viewers into a space where script becomes a site of both confusion and creativity. Ultimately, his practice reveals language as a fluid, contested terrain, where the act of reading (or failing to read) becomes a metaphor for the broader struggles of cultural translation in a globalised world.

2. Calligraphy 'Script' Revolutions

Xu Bing (b. 1955) is a renowned Chinese contemporary artist internationally recognised for his innovative engagement with language, text, and cultural identity. Born in Chongqing and raised in Beijing, Xu Bing came of age during the Cultural Revolution, an experience that deeply informed both his life and art [25]. Early in his career, he worked on a rural farm and later for a government propaganda brigade, honing his skills in traditional Chinese calligraphy and large-character posters [8]. These formative experiences grounded Xu Bing in the techniques and aesthetics of the Chinese calligraphic tradition.

The late 1980s were a period of profound change and uncertainty in China. The country was emerging from the Cultural Revolution and entering an era marked by economic reforms and ideological shifts. Many intellectuals and artists felt a 'vacuum of values'—a sense of disorientation as old certainties faded and new ones had yet to be established [6]. The 'vacuum of values' prompted artists and intellectuals to experiment, question, and innovate. Their works often reflected uncertainty, ambiguity, and a search for meaning, breaking with tradition and opening up new ways of seeing and understanding the world. This period of disorientation thus became a powerful catalyst for creativity and transformation in the arts and ideas. In this context, *Book from the Sky* can be understood as both a product of and a commentary on a society in transition.

As art historian Jerome Silbergeld notes, 'it was difficult at the time to make explicit value judgments about works like *Book from the Sky* because they operated outside the established frameworks of meaning [22].' Xu Bing's art neither celebrates nor condemns tradition but rather suspends the viewer in a space of ambiguity. The work resists easy interpretation, reflecting the uncertainty and questioning spirit of its historical moment.

Also, Xu Bing's art is fundamentally rooted in the visual and conceptual power of Chinese characters, regarded as both a medium of communication and a symbol of cultural identity. His early masterpiece, *Book from the Sky* (天书, 1987–1991), features thousands of invented, unreadable Chinese-like characters, questioning the authority and legibility of

language itself [5].

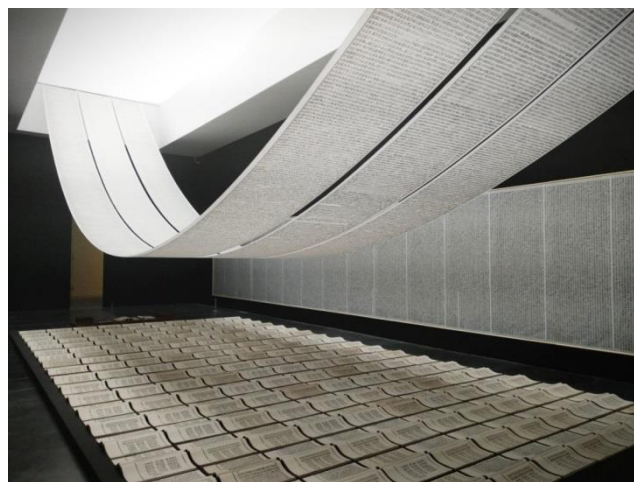


Figure 1. Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky* (天书, 1987–1991), Printmaking, 1988 [28].

Xu Bing's open 'the reader's mindset in a way that rejects the reader, creating more possibilities in an uninterpretable state [24].' Figure 1 shows that *Book from the Sky* intentionally frustrates the viewer's desire for comprehension, inviting instead a meditation on the limits of language and the possibility of meaning beyond words. The work's ambiguity is metaphysical: it raises philosophical questions about reality, representation, and the burdens of cultural tradition.

By presenting a 'script' that cannot be read, Xu Bing highlights the constructed nature of all symbolic systems. He suggests that our reliance on language as a tool for communication and identity is, in some sense, always precarious—vulnerable to misreading, manipulation, and emptiness [13]. *Book from the Sky* is also a reflection on the 'cultural burdens' that people may carry. For Xu Bing, the weight of tradition can be both a resource and a constraint. This work asks whether it is possible to find freedom or new meaning within the forms of the past, or whether they inevitably trap people. By rendering Chinese calligraphy both beautiful and unreadable, Xu Bing stages a confrontation between reverence for tradition and the necessity of transformation.

After Xu Bing moved to the United States in 1990, he found himself immersed in a new cultural environment where language and its visual forms became a fashionable and relevant topic in the international art scene [4]. Drawing on both Western deconstructionist philosophy and his experimental approach to calligraphy, Xu Bing explored the complexities of cross-cultural communication and meaning.

In 1994, Xu Bing began developing what he called *Square Word Calligraphy*, sometimes referred to as *New English Calligraphy*. This innovative system organises the letters of each English word into a square configuration that visually resembles Chinese characters. According to the Metropolitan Museum of

Art, An Introduction to *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994–1996) is a large handscroll in which Xu Bing not only demonstrates this new script but also provides didactic instructions on preparing

ink, holding the brush, and making brushstrokes, closely following the traditional Chinese calligraphic format [26].

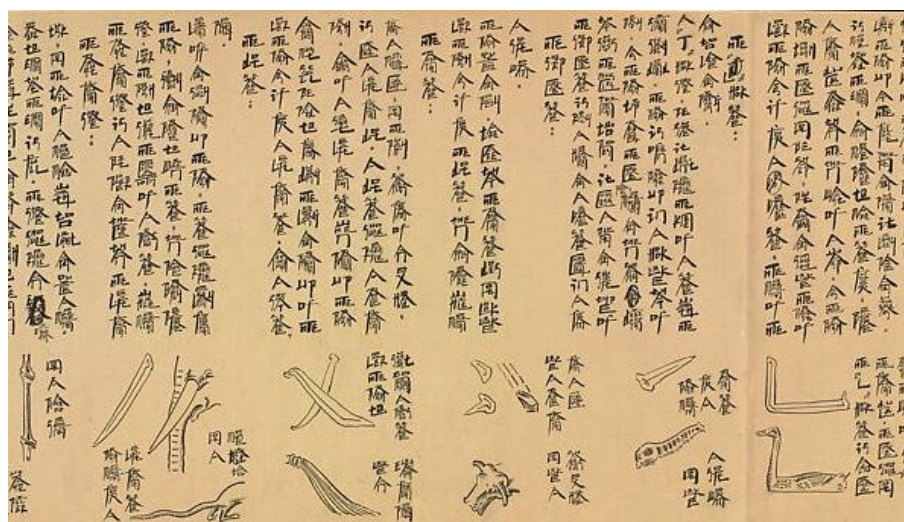


Figure 2. Xu Bing, *Square Word Calligraphy*, Ink on Paper, 1994–1996 [27].

Figure 2, as shown in *Square Word Calligraphy*, allowed Western viewers to experience calligraphy in a way that felt familiar in form but remained fundamentally English in content. Xu Bing's system broke away from the pictographic combinations of traditional Chinese script, presenting a hybridised writing form. As Xu Bing himself explained, 'If a Westerner reads the meaning of these words and knows how to write them, it will be very interesting [16].' The reading order generally follows Chinese conventions—left to right, top to bottom, outside to inside—but the writing occasionally adapts for clarity or frequency of certain words, illustrating Xu's flexibility and creative approach. Dora Ching points out 'From his 4,000 unreadable Chinese-looking characters, which unite Asian and Western audiences alike in an egalitarianism of induced illiteracy, to his invention of a 'square words' language that makes 'Chinese' readable by anyone at all, Xu Bing's use of language is at once artistically brilliant, highly entertaining, and profoundly subversive [9].' *Square Word Calligraphy* can be read as a subversive act—undermining the authority of tradition and highlighting the contractedness of language—it can also be seen as a gesture of cross-cultural generosity. Xu Bing's practice thus highlights the arbitrary and constructed nature of language, questioning its role as a stable vessel of meaning or identity. However, rather than simply deconstructing or negating meaning, he offers new forms and possibilities. His art universalises the experience of both literacy and illiteracy, suggesting that confusion and curiosity can lead to deeper understanding and connection. Also, his work ultimately reminds visitors that communication is not only about clarity but also about the creative potential that emerges when cultures and systems intersect.

3. Beyond Words

At the same time, he consciously attempted to shed his modern Chinese style in hopes of integrating into Western art contexts, reflecting the broader Chinese discourse of 'Complete Westernisation' in the late twentieth century.



Figure 3. Xu Bing, *A Case Study of Transference*, Mixed Media, 1994 [14].

A notable result of this period is *A Case Study of Transference* (also known as *Cultural Animal*, 1994), a provocative performance and video artwork. In Figure 3, Xu Bing 'staged the copulation of two pigs—one marked with nonsensical English words, the other with fanciful Chinese characters—before a live audience [11].' The work is a literal and metaphorical collision of East and West, using the bodies of animals as living canvases inscribed with the marks of human civilisation. While viewers worried the pigs would react anxiously to their alien environment, it was instead the human audience who felt discomfort and awkwardness, revealing 'the limitations and inability to adapt of the human audience [17].' Britta Erickson points out 'Xu Bing described the performance as an expression of his emotional state at the time, shaped by dissatisfaction with the dominance of Western culture [13].'

Building on Britta Erickson's insight that Xu Bing's *Cultural Animal* emerged from his emotional response to Western cultural dominance, several new interpretive directions emerge. First, the work not only dramatizes cultural collision but also hints at the potential for synthesis, suggesting that hybrid identities can arise from such encounters. Second, the agency of the pigs—acting independently of the human-imposed scripts—invites a reconsideration of how cultural identities are negotiated, not simply dictated. Third, by centring animal behaviour, Xu Bing's work decouples cultural critique from a solely human perspective, opening space to consider non-human actors in cultural exchange. Fourth, the artist's embrace of emotion as a catalyst for creativity highlights the importance of affect in cross-cultural artistic processes, suggesting that feelings of alienation or frustration can drive innovation. Finally, the piece remains highly relevant today, providing a model for confronting not only East-West tensions but also other global divides. Xu Bing's approach, which foregrounds discomfort and ambiguity, encourages viewers and artists alike to navigate cultural boundaries in ways that are critical, generative, and open to new forms of understanding.

By harnessing the irrationality and instinct of animals to stage an encounter between cultures, Xu Bing exposes the complexities and contradictions of cultural blending, collision, and rejection [7]. Over time, he has returned to his roots in textual experimentation, using language not just as a resource, but as a central theme for exploring the challenges and opportunities of cultural transformation [2].

4. The Illusion of Language

After entering the 21st century, Xu Bing's creative journey entered a new stage marked by deeper cross-cultural dialogue and experimentation with new media. Building upon his earlier investigations into language, identity, and tradition, Xu Bing began to embrace digital technology, animation, and installation art as tools to further deconstruct and reinterpret Chinese script in a global context. Works such as *The Character of Characters* exemplify this period, demonstrating his continued fascination with the written word while also engaging contemporary audiences in fresh and innovative ways. This era of his practice is characterised by a greater emphasis on intercultural communication, the transformative power of art, and an ongoing reflection on the role of tradition in an era of rapid social and technological change [29].

Xu Bing's animation *The Character of Characters* masterfully uses moving images to bridge the ancient art of Chinese calligraphy with the contemporary global context. The animation opens with the writing of the horizontal stroke '一' (In Chinese means One Horizontal), symbolising not just a single line but the inception of all things, echoing the Chinese philosophical concept of 'one begets everything [28].' Xu Bing turns this simple stroke into a visual narrative—its transformation into textures, landscapes, and even animal forms embodies the diversity and richness of Chinese civilisation. Each frame captures the irreproducible beauty of ink and brush, resonating with the spirit of Chinese history and aesthetics [10].

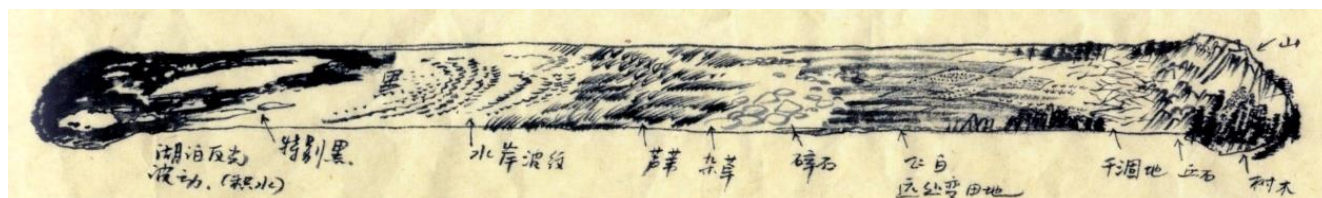


Figure 4. Xu Bing, *The Character of Characters*, Mixed Media, 2012 [30].

Through this work, Xu Bing illustrates how Chinese calligraphy is fundamentally different from its Western counterpart. Where Western calligraphy often pursues uniformity and precision, Chinese calligraphy values expressive brushwork—ink blots and dry strokes are seen as spontaneous artistic gestures, not flaws [18]. Through his artistic practice, Xu Bing demonstrates the fundamental

distinctions between Chinese calligraphy and its Western counterpart. In Western traditions, calligraphy has historically emphasised uniformity, precision, and legibility. 'The beauty of Western calligraphy is found in its ordered appearance—each letter carefully rendered to achieve symmetry and consistency, often resembling a formal typeface. Tools such as quills, dip pens, or fountain pens are

employed to produce regular strokes, and any deviation from the norm is usually considered an error to be corrected [15].’ This approach reflects a broader cultural preference for clarity, repetition, and the replication of forms, especially evident in illuminated manuscripts and other formal documents.

In stark contrast, Chinese calligraphy values expressiveness and spontaneity. The use of brush, ink, and absorbent paper allows for a wide variety of effects, from bold, saturated lines to delicate, dry strokes [19]. Rather than striving for mechanical uniformity, Chinese calligraphers seek to imbue each character with a sense of individual spirit and emotion. Ink blots and irregularities are not seen as flaws but as authentic traces of the artist’s mood and energy in that moment [12]. This approach is deeply rooted in Chinese philosophical traditions, particularly Daoism and Confucianism, which regard calligraphy as a form of self-cultivation and a reflection of personal character.

Figure 4 shows Xu Bing how to make these differences visible by showcasing the dynamic and performative nature of Chinese calligraphic strokes. Each brushstroke is not only unique and expressive but also serves as a visual record of the artist’s movement and rhythm. The thickness, curvature, and texture of the ink reflect subtle variations in the artist’s hand pressure, speed, and angle as the brush moves across the paper. For example, a swift, light stroke may produce a thin, delicate line, while a slower, heavier stroke can create a bold, textured mark [29]. These visible traces capture Xu Bing’s energy, intention, and even emotional state at the moment of creation. In this way, every stroke becomes a living imprint of his gestures, transforming calligraphy from mere writing into a dynamic performance art that conveys both tradition and personal expression.

This divergence in philosophy means that, whilst Western calligraphy aspires to perfection and reproducibility, Chinese calligraphy celebrates the unpredictable and the expressive. Xu Bing’s art, therefore, not only bridges these traditions but also invites viewers to reconsider the meaning of written language as both an art form and a reflection of the inner self.

Yang Panpan points out, Xu Bing’s animation video made visible the performative, process-driven nature of Chinese calligraphy, in which every brushstroke was shaped by the artist’s hand, mood, and speed. Unlike Western calligraphy, which historically valued regularity and mechanical reproduction, Chinese calligraphy treasured irregularities and expressive gestures as marks of individuality [31].

Yang Panpan’s analysis of Xu Bing’s animation *The Character of Characters* highlights the performative and expressive qualities of Chinese calligraphy. Yang’s study demonstrates how Xu Bing visually reveals each brushstroke’s individuality, shaped by the calligrapher’s hand, mood, and speed. In contrast, Western calligraphy traditionally values regularity and precision, often prioritising uniformity over personal expression [20]. Chinese calligraphy, however, sees irregularities and expressive gestures as marks of individuality and authenticity.

Xu Bing’s mixed media works, particularly exemplified in *The Character of Characters*, vividly illustrate the dilemmas inherent in cultural communication. His art navigates the complexities that arise when traditional Chinese calligraphy, with its emphasis on individual expression and unpredictability, encounters global audiences accustomed to different visual and linguistic conventions. Xu Bing often deliberately blurs the boundaries between recognisable and unfamiliar scripts, prompting viewers to question the very act of reading and interpretation [30]. However, this approach foregrounds the tension between cultural specificity and universality: while his calligraphy serves as a vehicle for sharing Chinese aesthetic values, it also exposes the potential for misinterpretation or alienation when context is lost. Xu Bing’s work ultimately suggests that true cultural communication requires not only the transmission of symbols but also an openness to the ambiguity, multiplicity, and creativity inherent in artistic language. Through his innovative calligraphic practice, he invites dialogue about how traditions can be both preserved and transformed in a globalised world, highlighting that meaning is always negotiated between creator and audience.

5. Conclusion

Xu Bing’s calligraphic art provides a fascinating entry point for considering the dilemmas inherent in cultural communication. His works, such as *Book from the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy*, reveal how artistic language can both connect and divide. On the one hand, Xu Bing’s practice bridges diverse traditions, enabling viewers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to engage with the visual and conceptual beauty of calligraphy. On the other hand, his deliberate manipulation and reinvention of scripts highlight the risk of miscommunication and cultural alienation, as familiar symbols become unreadable or ambiguous. This duality reflects the broader challenges faced in cross-cultural exchange: the desire for mutual understanding is often accompanied by the potential for confusion and misinterpretation. By highlighting how meanings can change and how language is something people create, Xu Bing encourages audiences to question their own beliefs about words and to think about how difficult it can be to truly understand one another, especially across different cultures and languages [21]. In this way, his calligraphy not only embodies the dilemmas of cultural transmission but also models a productive openness to difference, ambiguity, and creative transformation. However, Xu Bing’s adjustments in artistic language and communication are a thoughtful response to the complexities of the international art world. They reflect his desire to make art that transcends cultural boundaries, questions the nature of language, and encourages dialogue and understanding in a globalised society.

Author Contributions

Siyang Gu is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

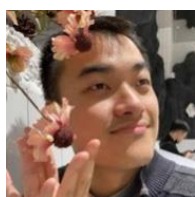
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Bibliography



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Research Filed

Siyang Gu: Modern Chinese art, Shanghai urban development and society, Film and Visual culture, East Asian modernity, Transnational cultural exchange, Art historiography, Cultural policy, Chinese contemporary art.