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Author(s): Hajime Nakatani
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Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91, hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls printed from wood letterpress type using false Chinese characters, installation view, *Three Installations by Xu Bing*, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991–92 (artwork © Xu Bing)

Imperious Griffonage: Xu Bing and the Graphic Regime

Hajime Nakatani

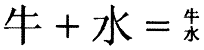
> *You know, I don't believe there's such a thing as the Japanese language. I mean, they don't even know how to write. They just draw pictures of these little characters.*
> —Laurie Anderson, *USA Live*

Chiasmus

I'd like to broach my discussion with a scene of writing. The setting is a primary-school classroom late in the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–circa 1975). A young teacher is copying from a textbook onto a blackboard. The text being copied is of course studded with obligatory tributes to the Party and shone through by the rising sun of Maoism. Several dozen heads nod up and down as students earnestly copy the teacher's copy of the printed text. As striking as the mute intensity of this graphic litany is the low but persistent noise of chalk and pencils, whose incessant hitting of the board and scratching of the pages, set against the speechless background of the collective endeavor, achieves an almost claustrophobic intensity.

This is one of the recurrent scenes of writing in Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* (1987), a memorable film about a young teacher sent down, like many of his generation, to the marginal southern province of Yunnan during the Cultural Revolution.[1] Awaiting the idealistic young man there is the harsh reality of the poverty-stricken local school, where textbooks are in critical shortage. Compounding the situation is the pedagogical directive of the local party, which confines teaching to the verbatim transmission of Party-sanctioned textbooks. Baffled, but with no alternative, the young teacher at first reluctantly conforms to the status quo. But the force of the scene goes beyond these local circumstances to comment on a more general condition of cultural transmission. The pedagogical model here is ultimately that of writing that writes itself, teachers and students alike inserted in a tautological circuit as its mere linkages. With a sensory tangibility that overrides even the ideological content of the texts being copied, writing repeatedly summons and subjugates bodies to the scene of its self-perpetuation. The profound complicity between the operation of power and the physical act of writing is a crucial component of what I call the graphic regime. Perhaps elsewhere as well, but especially in China, the sheer physicality of writing has continuously defined the ground parameters of what culture is. The revolutionary era was no exception.[2]

But there is another layer to *The King of the Children*'s scene of writing. For the noise permeating the room comes not only from the scratching and scribbling of writing but also from the tramping of the herd of cows strolling in the vicinity of the school yard, long shots of which repeatedly cut into the scene to profoundly inflect its meaning. One day, while routinely copying the textbook, the teacher inadvertently mixes in a nonexistent character consisting of the graph "cow" above the graph "water." In a later account to the children, the teacher tries to explain his miswriting by evoking a piece of folk knowledge: cows are stubborn, nonsubmissive animals, yet one can subdue them with one's urine, because they love salt madly.



Structure of "cow-water" pseudocharacter

Rey Chow interprets this event of miswriting as a subversive intrusion of

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The epigraphs on pages 7 and 9 are from Laurie Anderson, *United States Live*, Warner Brothers 4-CD set, 1984, CD 2. The title of the song "'Language Is a Virus from Outer Space'—William S. Burroughs," also on CD 2, is paraphrased from William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

[1] In a directive that appeared in the December 22, 1968, edition of the *People's Daily*, Mao Zedong called on urban youths to "re-educate" themselves through labor in the countryside, thereby inaugurating what came to be known as the rustication movement, in which millions were relocated—willingly or under coercion—to such peripheral provinces as Yunnan or Guizhou to spend years embedded in remote rural communities. While couched in the ideological language of socialist *Bildung*, the movement was primarily aimed at quelling the chaos of the Cultural Revolution by displacing the youth away from urban centers.

[2] See François Jullien, *L'Encre de chine* (Lausanne: Alfred Eibel, 1978); and David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 86, 244, 273ff.

nature into the hegemonic text of culture, an intrusion that threatens the closure of the teacher's national subjectivity by exposing—via scatological insight—the dirty truth of culture as senseless subjugation.[3] Chow is certainly correct to stress that miswriting here conjures up the threat of nature's disruption of the text of culture, but I want to raise one simple observation against this otherwise perceptive reading. Namely, even as it disrupts culture's text, *nature also writes*—albeit in gibberish. Not unlike the overlay of the cows' steady, stomping noise that competes with the scratching sound of inscription, nature (figured here in the overbearing bovine presence) momentarily overtakes the teacher's inscribing hand to furtively drop its own mark amid human syntax. In other words, this intrusion of nature produces not a sheer negation of writing, as Chow seems to suggest, but *another* writing—a bovine script as it were—that insists in its peculiar graphic presence.

We encounter this alignment of nature with writing again when the mute cowherd—who acts in the film as the personification of nature and who rejects with stubborn silence the teacher's well-meaning offer to instruct him in how to write—intrudes on an empty classroom to compose his own mysterious script on the blackboard. The singular cryptogram, thrown together with cow dung and feathers, mimics the act of writing without achieving semantic efficacy. Yet the mute, material insistence of this script lends it a powerful mystique, one that transfixes the teacher and the camera alike in a moment of semiotic abandon.

Thus in *The King of the Children*, the line that separates nature and culture does not run between writing and its absence. Rather, it lies between the lexicographically sanctioned writing of culture and nature's own script. Writing as such thus straddles the great nature-culture divide, dictating to the two sides the terms of their negotiations. It is in this absolute, totalizing sense that I will speak in this essay of a graphic regime. With the term, I want to evoke the ways in which writing serves not only to transcribe a world existing out there but to actively shape its implicit order. In a nutshell, the graphic regime is the world conceived *as* writing, a cosmo-graphy in the literal sense of the writing of the cosmos.

Notwithstanding its successive inflections and refigurations, an enduring equation between the conceivability of order and the envisioning of the world in the likeness of writing appears to persist through the long and variegated history of China. Scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the perennial role writing played in defining the fundamental outlook of early imperial order and lending some of its most salient and enduring characteristics—e.g., the formidable imperial bureaucracy and its massive textual output through which the polity was rendered accountable and manageable, the ideological centrality of scriptures and commentaries not only in Han and post-Han Confucianism but also in religious Daoism and later in Buddhism, and the cosmological authority accorded such graphic systems as the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*).[4] Indeed, writing as such was deemed to be the creation of ancient sages, the privileged cosmographic matrix through which later rulers were to know the world and enact its implicit order.

With some notable exceptions, this growing scholarship tends to relegate the persistent nondistinction between writing and world to the status of instrumental irreality—i.e., ideological apparatuses and phantasmic formations of power serving at once to mask and to facilitate the imperial state's real-political interests and desires. Such an instrumentalist account of the role of writing in the formation of Chinese imperial order, which also finds echoes in well-known media-historical theories on the intersections between writing and complex polities elsewhere, may have its own usefulness, but it also risks foreclosing insights into the more subtle and deep-seated complicity between imperial order and the graphic regime.[5] At this deeper level, the relationship between writing and empire needs to be reversed. Namely, rather than writing simply serving the imperial state as its communicative and political medium, successive imperial dynasties inserted themselves in a world always already conceived as writing. It may even be argued that, in a sense, the dynasties themselves served as instruments for the graphic regime's blind self-perpetuation.

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[3] Rey Chow, "Male Narcissism and National Culture: Subjectivity in Chen Kaige's *King of the Children*," in *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 127–30.

[4] See Christopher L. Connery, *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); David N. Keightley, "Art, Ancestors, and the Origins of Writing in China," *Representations* 56 (1996); Jean Levi, "Rite, langue et supériorité culturelle en Chine ancienne," *Le Genre humain* 21 (1990); and Mark E. Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

It is the positivity of such a graphic vision that needs to be fathomed. But how is it possible to insert ourselves into such an unfamiliar vision? My essay is a modest attempt to grope for a point of entry through the works of Xu Bing (b. 1955), the prominent Chinese artist (now based in New York) who has been at the center of contemporary Chinese art's quick rise to international prominence since the 1980s and whose oeuvre constitutes one of the most poignant contemporary attempts to reenact the experience of the graphic regime. Xu's extraordinary work confronts the beholder with a series of perceptual questions and paradoxes. Patiently tackling each of these graphic exercises will bring us to the threshold of another history of writing, no doubt punctuated by numerous shifts and ruptures, whose historical grammar is not yet readily available to us. If in the course of this exercise I give the impression of positing an ahistoric and monolithic regime, it is only as a preliminary approximation, one that a fuller historical account may eventually reinstate to its originary disunity.[6]

Graphic Procreation

Language is a virus from outer space.
—attrib. William S. Burroughs

The intersection of writing and nature that informs Chen's film has also been a central preoccupation in Xu's works. For example, the *Character Landscapes* (2000) are presumably sketches of actual scenes, but Xu uses Chinese characters instead of natural forms to render the landscape in front of him. As if to actualize the modern (and predominantly Western) mythology of the Chinese pictograph, wherein characters are deemed to put forth more or less schematic likenesses of the things they stand for, Xu "depicts" a tree using the graph "tree" (*shu* 樹) and a rock using the graph "rock" (*shi* 石). At stake here, however, is not whether the notion of pictography offers an adequate characterization of the Chinese script, nor even whether Xu believes such to be the case.[7] In fact, the pictorial convincingness of these written landscapes owes less to the resemblance between shapes of objects and of graphs than it does to the prominent calligraphic strokes delineating them, serving to place Xu's landscapes squarely within the parameters of classical ink painting. In place of the pictographic myth, the works actualize another deep-seated cultural impulse: the myth of landscape as calligraphic formation, perhaps best exemplified by Huang Gongwang's fourteenth-century masterpiece *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountain*.[8] The conception of the calligraphic

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[5] On the intersection of writing and polity, see, for example, Harold A. Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); and Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[6] For a preliminary attempt at such a historicization, see my "The Empire of Fame: Writing and the Voice in Early Medieval China," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 14, no. 3 (2006): 535–66.

[7] The locus classicus for the pictographic hypothesis is Ernest Fenollosa's essay *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). For linguistic critiques of the notion of Chinese pictography, see for example John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 74-130; and Viviane Alleton, "Regards actuels sur l'écriture chinoise," in *Paroles à dire, parole à écrire*, ed. Viviane Alleton (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1997).

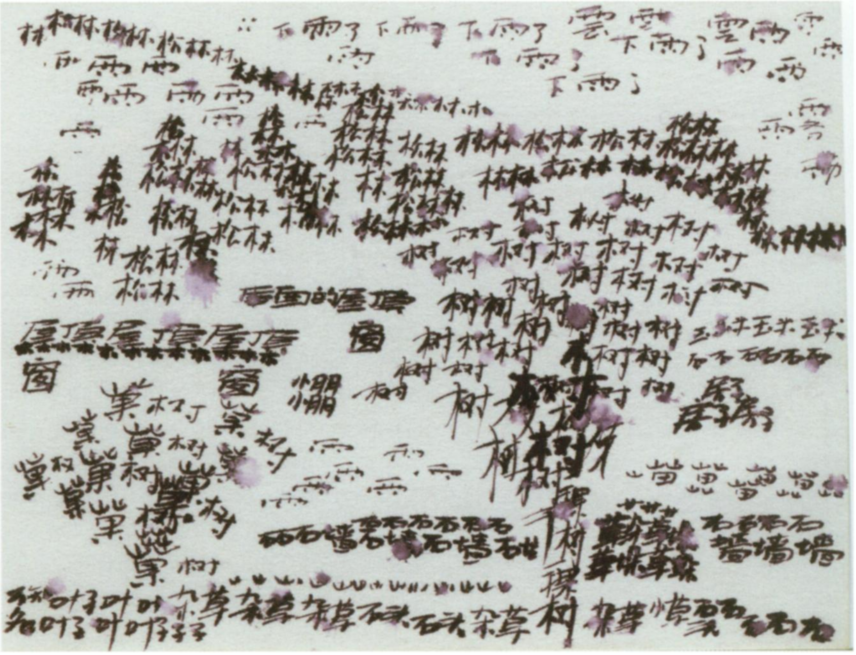
[8] On the geomantic associations of Huang Gongwang's landscape painting, see John Hay, "Huang Kung-wang's 'Dwelling in the Fu-ch'un Mountain': Dimensions of a Landscape" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1978).

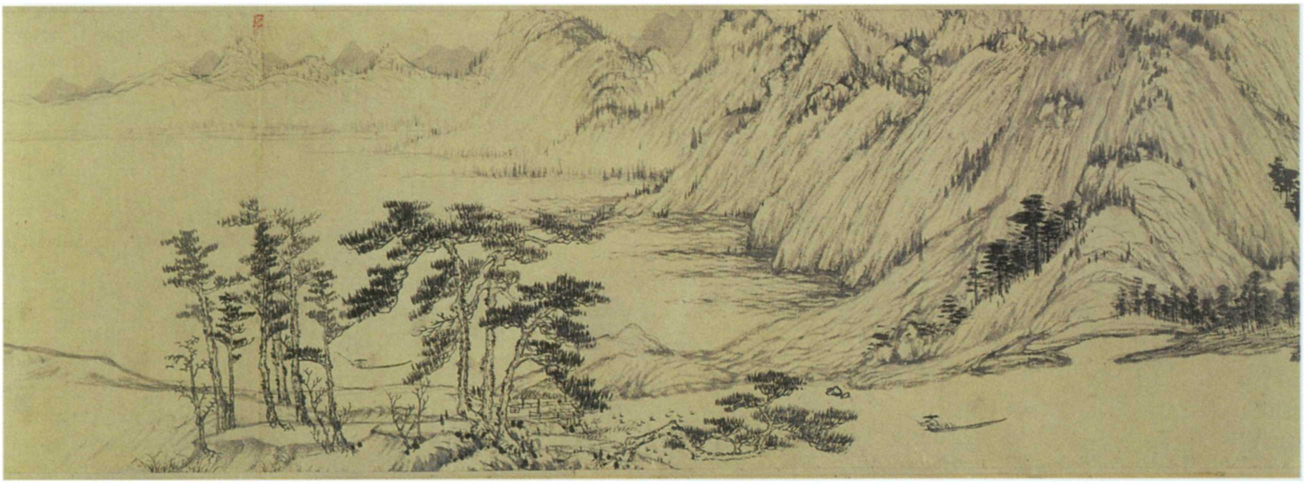
Xu Bing, from *Landscript Sketchbooks*, 1999–2000, ink on paper, 4½ x 5⅞ in. (11.3 x 15 cm) (artwork © Xu Bing)

Huang Gongwang, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountain*, ca. 1350, detail of handscroll, ink on paper, 13 in. x 20 ft. 10¾ in. (33 x 636.9 cm). Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan (artwork in the public domain)

Xu Bing, *American Silkworm Series 1: Silkworm Books*, 1994–95, live silk moths laying eggs on blank books, book 13 x 11 x 2 in. (33 x 27.9 x 5.1 cm) (artwork © Xu Bing)

Xu Bing, *American Silkworm Series 2*, 1994–95, live silkworms spinning silk on objects, including a laptop computer, newspapers, a Bible, computer paper, dimensions variable, installation view, *Xu Bing: Language Lost*, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, 1995 (artwork © Xu Bing)





stroke as embodiment of nature's immanent forces and articulations, one that governed post-Song dynasty landscape painting, is here rendered literal by embedding calligraphically traced graphs in real landscapes, thereby returning writing to its natural matrix.[9]

Xu's breathtaking installation *American Silkworm Series* also activates the affinities between writing and nature's pattern, albeit perhaps in the opposite direction. The association here between Braille and the patterns of eggs laid on the surface of the open pages is evident.[10] Less evident is the analogy between text and texture evoked by the delicate overlay of silk, at once masking and echoing the printed text beneath it. By capturing the moment of intersection between the pattern of nature and the pattern of culture, this evolving overlay realizes the enduring idea of *wen*, the signifying design that subsumes under its universal

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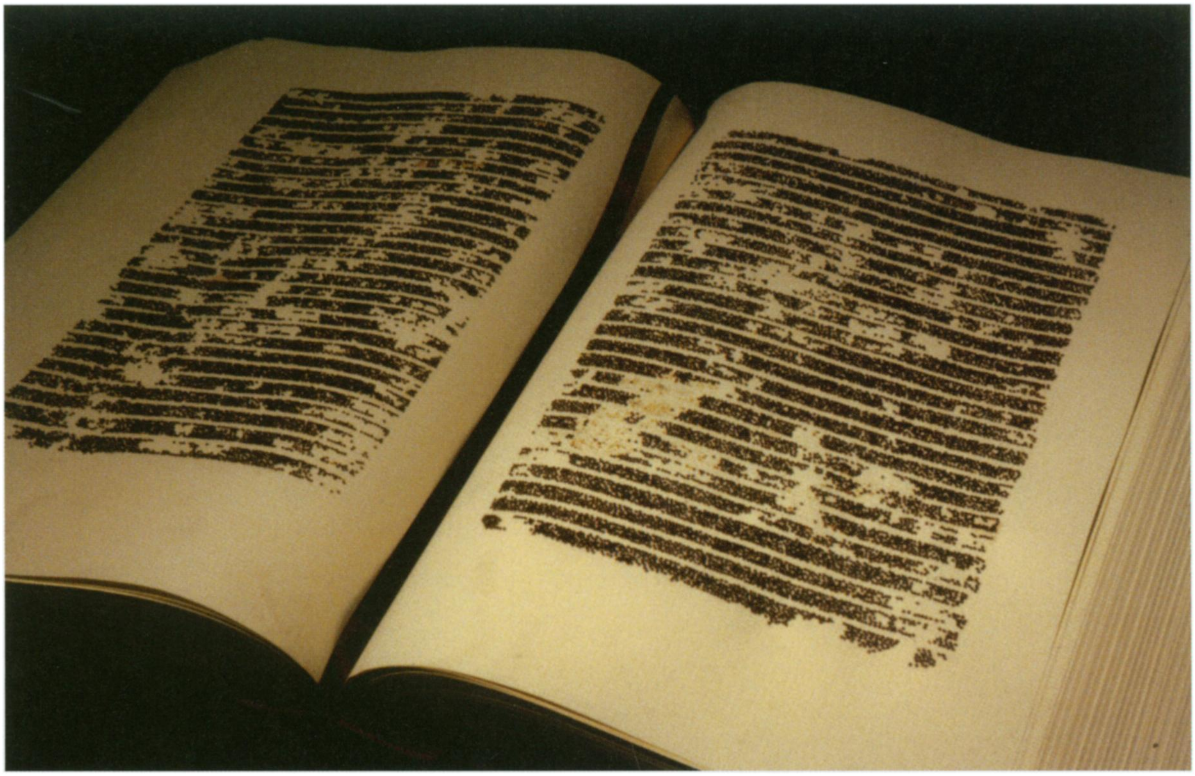
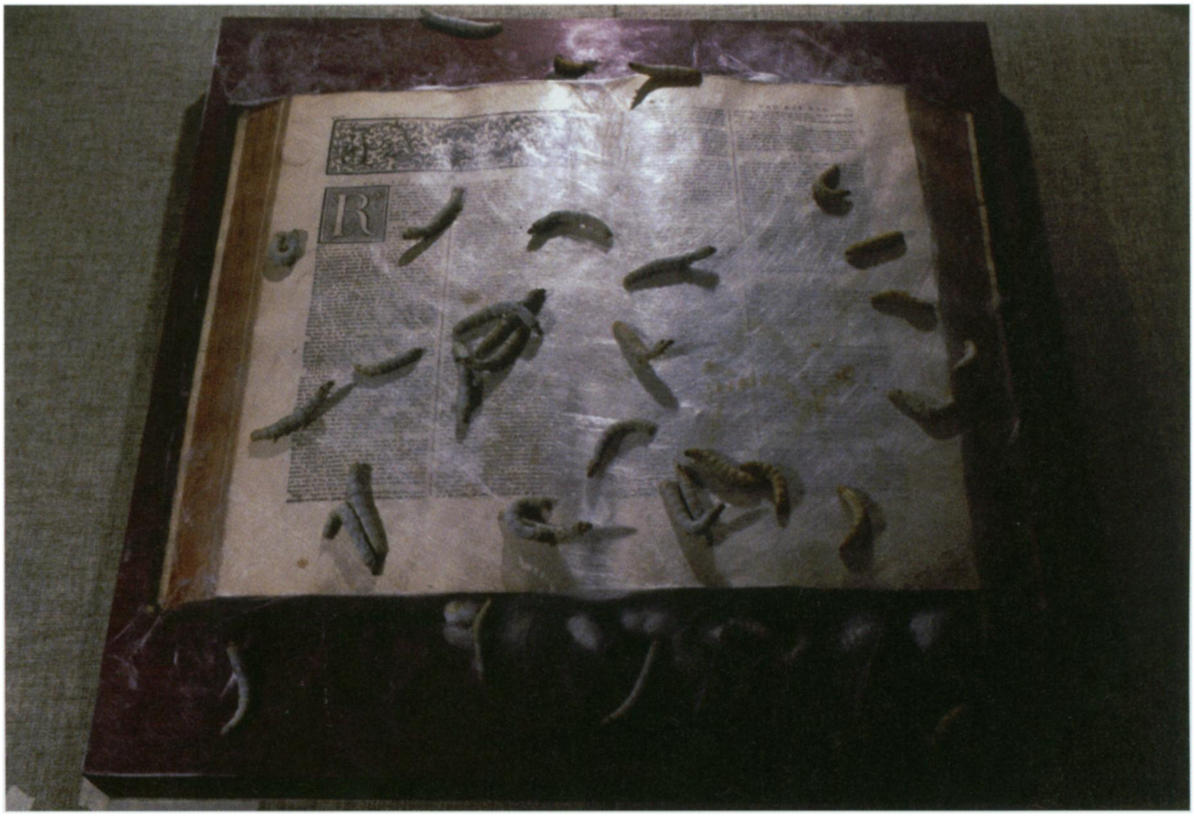
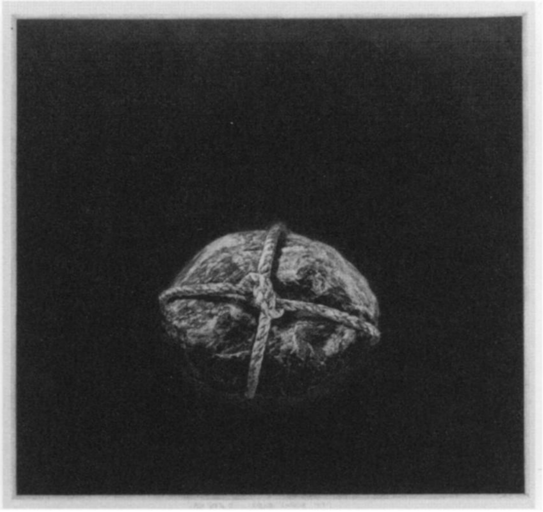
9. John Hay has been most eloquent in articulating the inner workings of the post-Song conception of painting. See his "Values and History in Chinese Painting, II: The Hierarchic Evolution of Structure," *Res* 7–8 (1984); "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?," in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and "The Human Body as Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy," in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. Thomas P. Kasulis, Roger T. Ames, and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

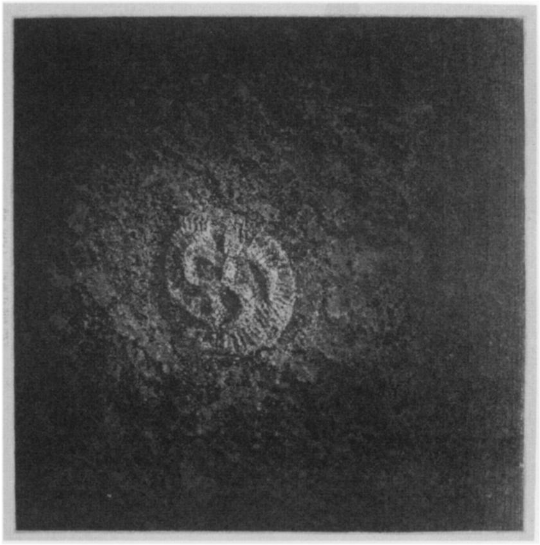
10. Eugene Y. Wang, "Of Text and Texture: The Cultural Relevance of Xu Bing's Art," in *Xu Bing: Language Lost*, exh. cat. (Boston: Massachusetts College of Art, 1995), 12.

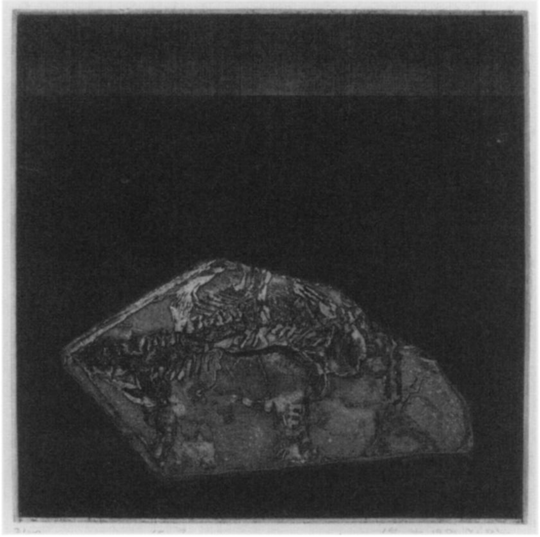


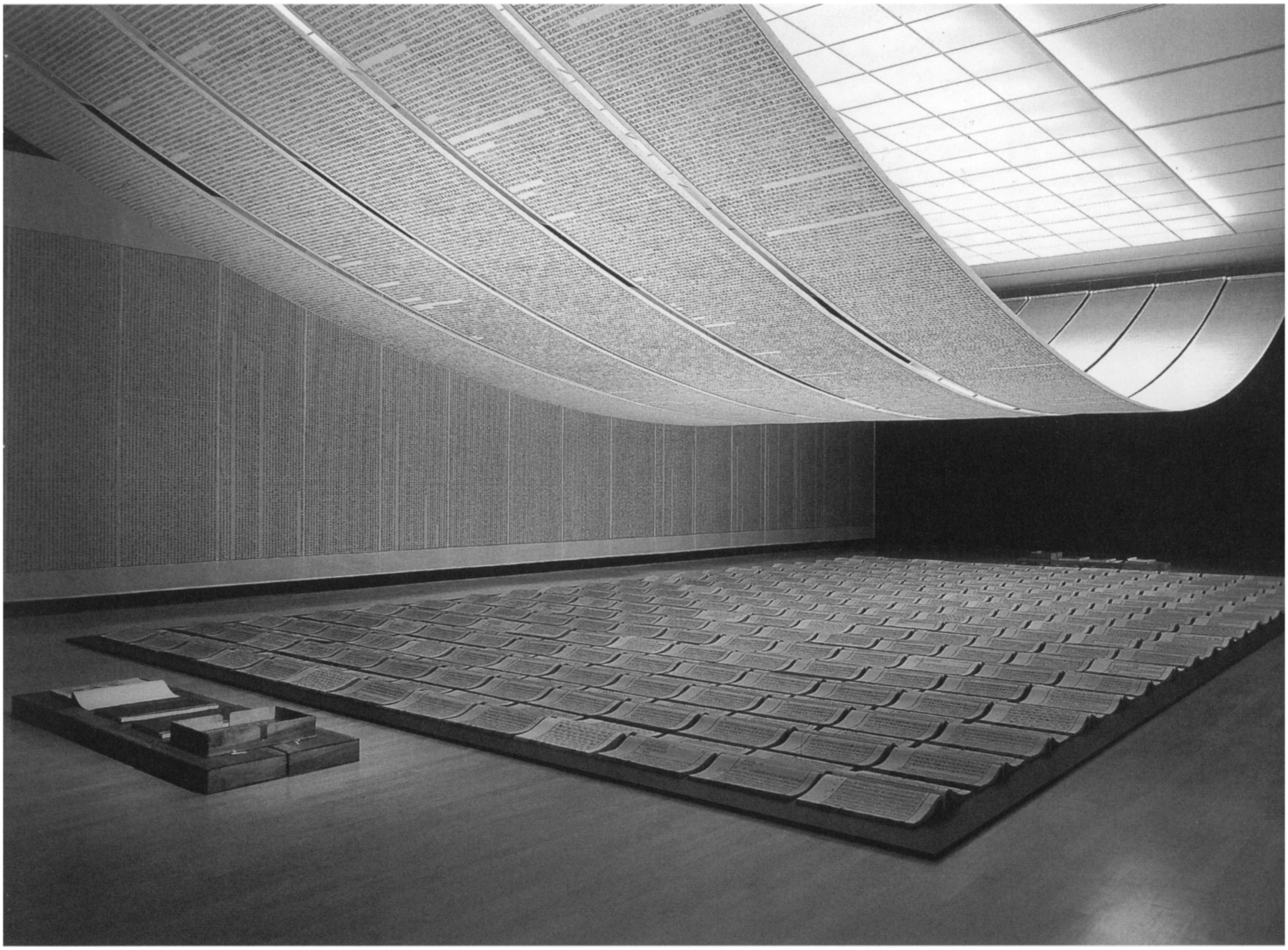


Xu Bing, *Pebble 2*, 1987, etching and mezzotint on paper, 19¼ x 20½ in. (49 x 52 cm); ***Fossil 1*, 1987,** etching and mezzotint on paper, 19½ x 19 in. (49.4 x 48.4 cm); and ***Moment 1*, 1988,** etching and mezzotint on paper, 9½ x 9½ in. (24 x 24 cm) (artworks © Xu Bing)









Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91, hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls printed from wood letterpress type using false Chinese characters, installation view, *Crossings*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1998 (artwork © Xu Bing)

legibility an eclectic array of patterns, including the graphic configuration of the script, the syntactical articulation of writing, ritual's measured choreography of the human body, and such natural patterns as the stripes and dots embellishing the myriad flora and fauna of the world.[11] Bringing these disparate cases of *wen* together is the idea of a nature that writes itself—which, as Eugene Wang points out, already informed Xu's early interest in fossils and rough petrified surfaces.[12] Yet the silkworms' effort to envelop the book of culture in a huge cocoon remains a frustrated one, since silkworms are incapable of forming cocoons on flat surfaces, thus holding the interweaving of nature and culture in a prolonged state of suspense.[13]

Yet the deconstructive project of these works, seeking to blur the entrenched divide between culture's text and nature's texture, is couched in a characteristically postmodernist gesture of provisionally accepting the divide in order subsequently

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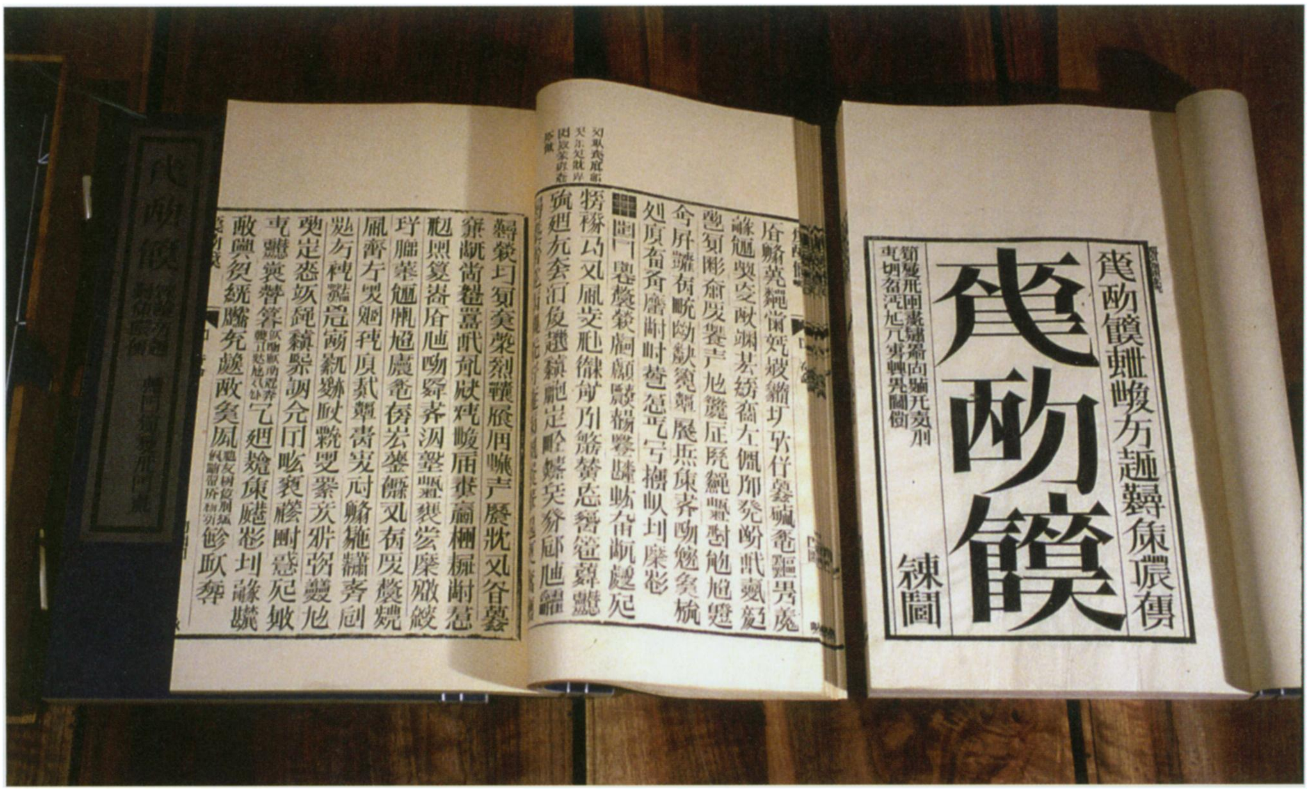
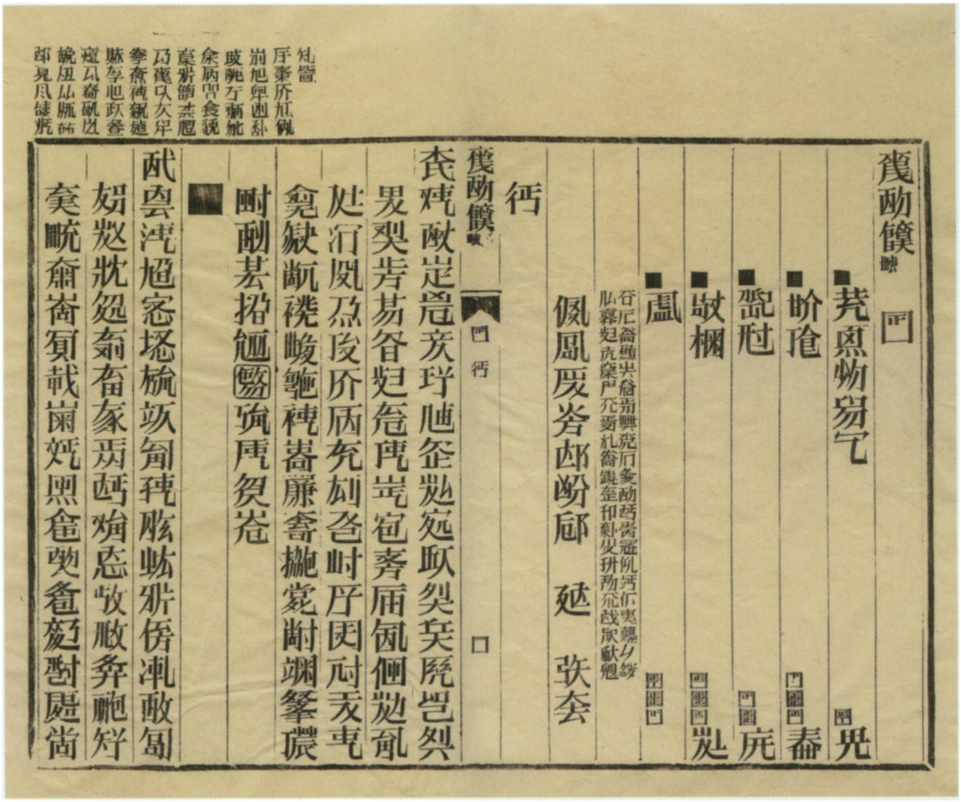
[11] On the authority of *wen*, see Haun Saussy, "The Prestige of Writing: *Wen*, Letter, Picture, Image, Ideography," in *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 66–71.

[12] Wang, 9.

[13] Xu Bing, conversation with author, 1995.

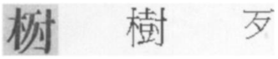




Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91, detail of one set (four volumes) of hand-sewn, thread-bound books printed from woodblock and wood letterpress type using false Chinese characters, ea. closed vol. 18⅛ x 11¾ in. (46 x 30 cm) (artwork © Xu Bing)

Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91, detail of last page of table of contents and first page of text of vol. 1 (artwork © Xu Bing) to transgress it, a gesture that perpetuates the divide even as it continually displaces it. We need to turn our eyes to an earlier work of the artist to find actualized the condition of a graphic regime that is truly indifferent to an ontological schism between textual meaning and texture of being. A landmark of Chinese experimental art that remains the artist's most intriguing achievement to date, *A Book from the Sky* 天書 is monumental precisely for the cosmic megalomania of its arrangement.[14] The mirroring and echoing among the ample scrolls hanging from the ceiling, the open volumes lined up on the floor—which faithfully reproduce the typographic and xylographic conventions of traditional Chinese book-printing and book-binding, down to the formats of front page, interlinear commentaries, marginalia, and table of contents—and the panels surrounding the large but nonetheless claustrophobic space of installation reenact the familiar Chinese cosmological trinity of Heaven, Earth, and Man.[15]

I hasten to qualify that I do not propose the cosmological model as the work's static and definitive allegorical meaning. Instead, I want to suggest that the cosmological setup constitutes a matrix in the root sense of the term, a productive configuration, a deployment of elements generative of a world. The cosmology of *A Book from the Sky* is such a matrix of world-making, ceaselessly spinning out questions, paradoxes, and, more than anything, writing. For the creatures crowding this fertile cosmos are countless graphs, or more precisely, pseudocharacters—"characters" that are generated through painstaking and exhaustive recombination of existing character-parts and fragments. For example, the pseudocharacter shown here consists of three distinct parts or elements, two of which (木 and 寸) are real characters in themselves and can also form parts of more complex graphs; the third unit in the middle is produced by eliminating one stroke from an existing character (which is also commonly used as component of complex characters). It is important to note that even as he thus tweaks and recombines existing units, Xu adheres closely to the fundamentally modular structure that governs the morphology of the Chinese script (the real one), whereby a limited number of simpler units—some of which form characters in and of themselves while others do not—recur in more complex graphs.[16] Thus, against all appearance, the artist's method does not contradict the formal principles of the Chinese script; it radicalizes them.



Structure of a pseudocharacter (diagram © the author)

The similarity this combinatorial operation gone wild bears to the scene of (mis-)writing in *The King of the Children* is unmistakable. Just as in the film nature reshuffles existing graphs to improvise its own writing, here the cosmic matrix defines a peculiar space, a cosmo-graphic machinery disarticulating and rearticulating culture's writing into a swarm of illegible but strangely compelling graphs. At the same time, the difference between *A Book* and *The King* is also significant. For if nature in the film disrupts the coherence of culture's text from outside, from beyond the confines of the classroom, the cosmos of Xu's installation is indifferent to such a division between inside and outside or even between nature and culture. It is a space permeated by the force of writing as such, a space in which nature's disunifying operation has been generalized to such an extent as to become integral to the cosmo-graphy's inherent operation. If *A Book from the Sky* is indeed a utopia, as Stanley Abe put it in a rather liberal adoption of Louis Marin's conception of the term, it is in the latter's specific sense of a space

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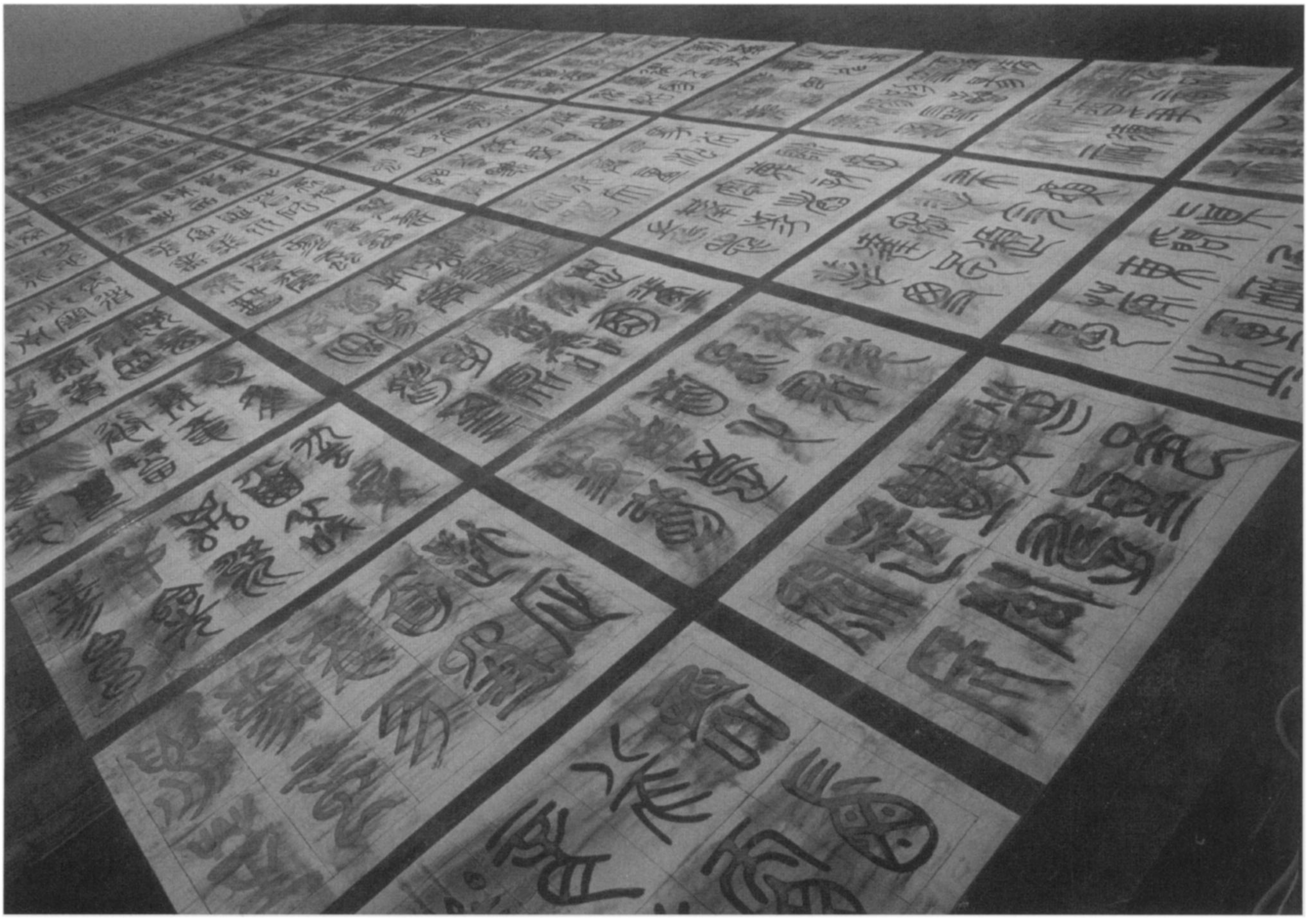
[14] On the effect of scale in *A Book from the Sky* and related works, see Robert E. Harrist, Jr., "*Book from the Sky* at Princeton: Reflections on Scale, Sense, and Sound" in *Persistence/Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*, ed. J. Silbergeld and D. C. Y. Ching (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 29–32.

[15] The fidelity of the books to traditional printing is indeed such that, according to the artist, the British Museum purchased a set as exemplar of traditional Chinese bookmaking. Xu Bing, conversation with author, 1995.

[16] A standard account of the structure of the Chinese script can be found in DeFrancis, 71–88. I owe the notion of the modularity of the Chinese script to Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9–23.



that neutralizes oppositions, a cosmos where the chiasmus of writing between the culture of nature and the nature of culture is a plain reality.[17]

That a vision of a natural writing figures in the works of these two contemporary artists is certainly not a coincidence.[18] The two were not immune to the so-called culture fever (*wenhua re*) that gripped Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, when the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution that was still fresh in memory and China's alleged failure to achieve modern glory were both attributed to the overbearing weight of the country's ossified tradition.[19] Nor were the many others who likewise engaged and continue to engage in artistic reflections on the Chinese script, such as, to name but a few: Gu Wenda, whose monumental calligraphic piece in an ancient script type called "seal script" (*zhuanshu*) is, as Wu Hung points out, illegible twice over: first, because the antiquity of the script type renders its meaning unavailable even to most Chinese beholders, and second, because the characters are all wrong one way or another;[20] Qiu Zhijie, who arduously copies the *Orchid Pavilion*—the most authoritative work of traditional calligraphy—a thousand times over the same sheet of paper, in a cynical self-cancelling endeavor culminating in a plain black block of ink; Song Dong, whose no less poignant performance engages the artist in a repetitive effort—all the more compulsive for its futility—to imprint the surface of water with a large woodblock carved with the character "water";[21] and Wang Tiande, whose

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[17] Stanley K. Abe, "No Questions, No Answers: China and *A Book from the Sky*," in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, ed. Rey Chow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 231; Louis Marin, *Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973), 20–21.

[18] A survey of artists engaging the medium of the book can be found in Wu Hung, et al., *Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute, 2006).

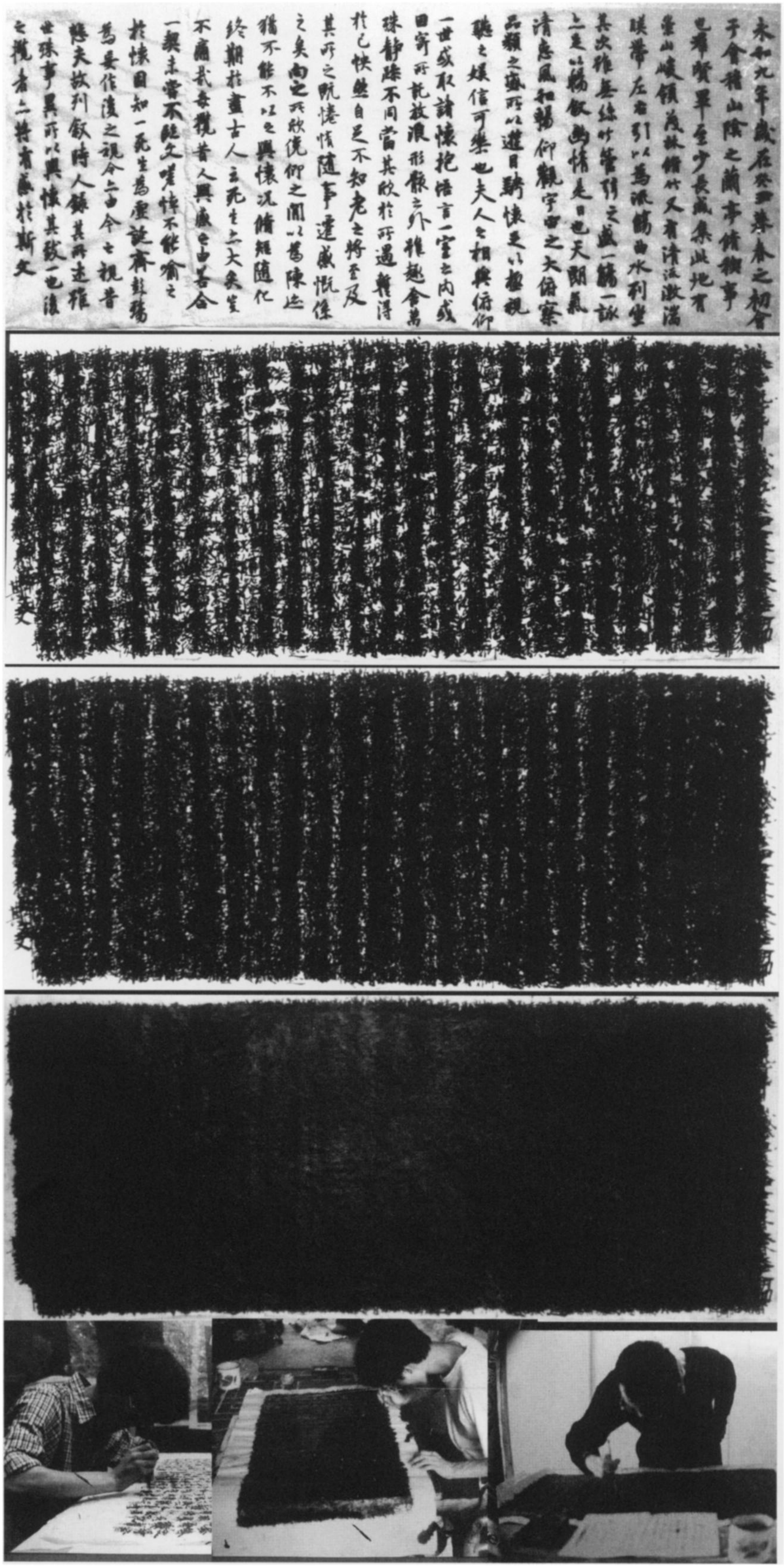
[19] For an in-depth study of this cultural phenomenon, see Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

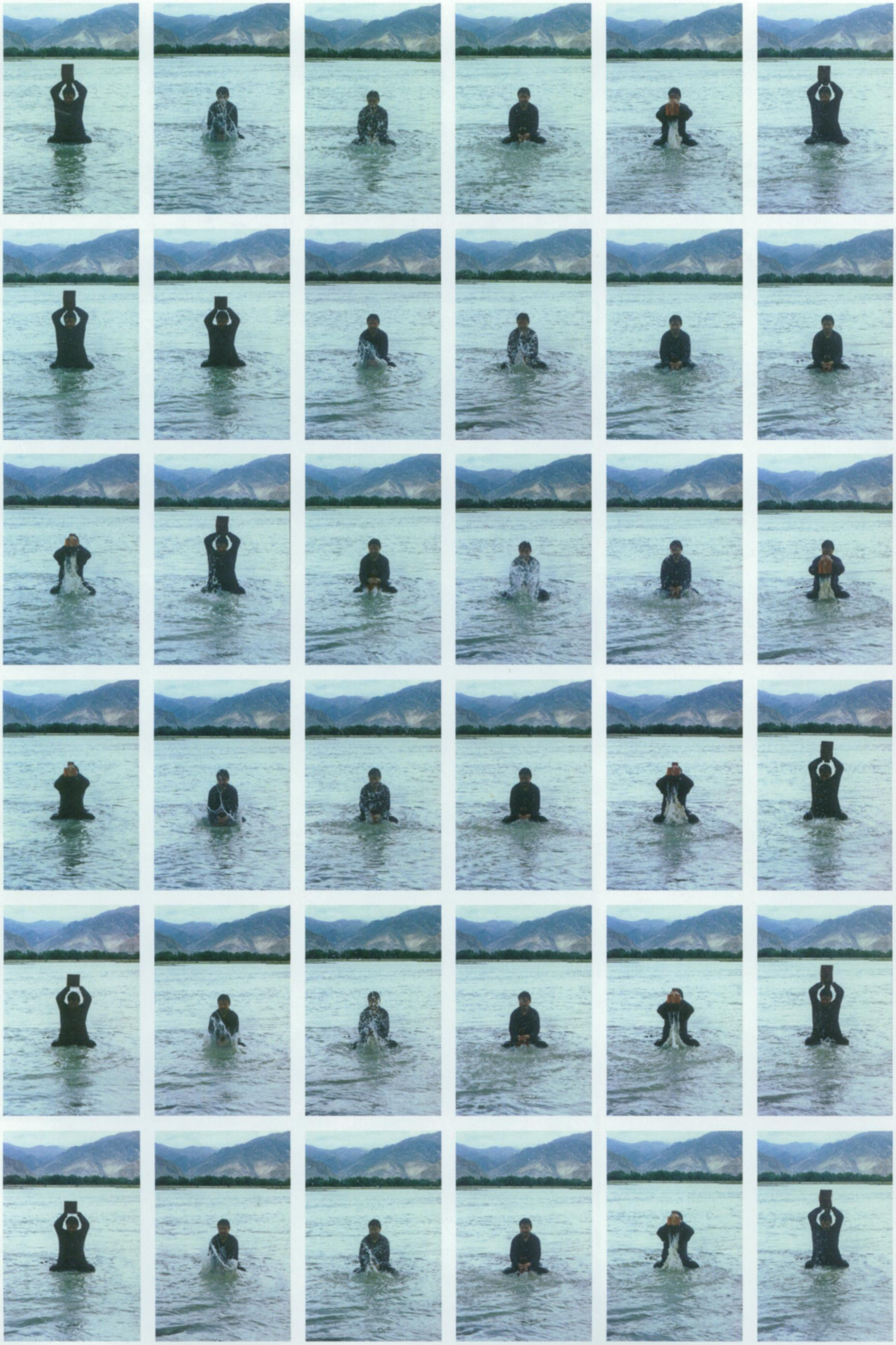
[20] Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999), 40–41. See also Wenda Gu et al., *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

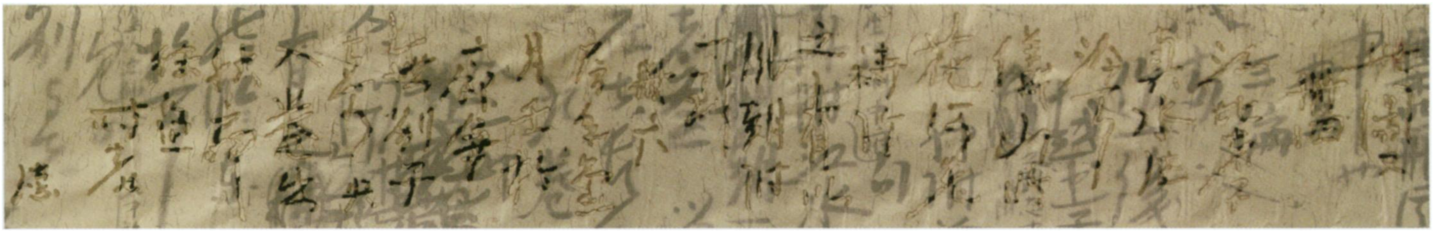
[21] See Norman Bryson's perceptive readings of Qiu Zhijie and Song Dong's works in view of the (post-)ideological condition of contemporary China in "The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Minglu Gao (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

opposite:
Gu Wenda, *Mythos of Lost Dynasties A Series,* 1983, pseudo-seal scripture in calligraphic copybook format, ink on rice paper, silk border mounting, ea. 24 x 36 in. (61 x 91.4 cm) (artwork © Gu Wenda)

Qiu Zhijie, *Writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times,* 1990–94, installation with video documentation, ink-on-paper calligraphy, approx. 16 ft. 6 in. x 16 ft. 6 in.(500 x 500 cm), calligraphy 29½ x 70⅞ in. (75 x 180 cm) (artwork © Qiu Zhijie)







Wang Tiande, *Digital 06-CL02*, 2006, Chinese ink on Xuan rice paper, burn marks, 14½ x 118⅞ in. (36.7 x 302 cm) (artwork © Wang Tiande)

opposite:
Song Dong, *Printing on Water*, 1996, performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet, one set of 36 chromogenic prints, ea. 24 x 20 in. (61 x 51 cm) (artwork © Song Dong)

exquisitely layered work covers a seemingly conventional piece of calligraphy—though barely legible and forming no readily comprehensible writing—with an overlay of a "negative calligraphy" as it were, "written" with lit cigarettes used to burn holes (or "dots," in the spirit of the work's title) into the paper.[22] It would be a tempting exercise of cultural history to examine the different ways in which writing figured and continues to figure in these and other artists' and authors' intense reflections on what many of them conceive as the prison-house of Chinese civilization—albeit with acute ambivalence. But the primary concern of my essay is not to contextualize the works in their immediate epochal background, but instead self-consciously to buy into and to attempt to inhabit the underlying graphic vision that they simultaneously seem to loathe and to embrace. My goal here is to use *A Book from the Sky* as a heuristic entry point into the Chinese graphic regime, so that we may begin to get a feel of this vision from the inside.

Such an interpretive gesture of inhabiting would seem to be particularly appropriate for a work like *A Book from the Sky*, itself the product of the artist's prolonged act of vicariously inhabiting the cosmo-graphic space subsequently materialized in the installation. The fact that the artist immersed himself in a yearlong retreat from the commotion of the late 1980s cultural scene into the solitude of his studio to design and to carve the pseudocharacters is by now something of a legend.[23] Instead of resorting to a facile narrative of spirituality and the lonely artist, I want to suggest that the long retreat was marked by the artist's *possession* by the cosmo-graphic vision. By "possession" I mean quite literally the conversion into an agent of the vision: Xu became the catalyzing agent for the cosmographic space in which graphs procreate by crossbreeding and regenerating in new combinations. Methodically and exhaustively, the artist precipitated this graphic orgy to give birth to the countless pseudocharacters.

If this sounds like a figment of a fertile imagination, the imagination turns out to have canonical backing. In the postscript to the still-authoritative ancient dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* compiled by the scholar Xu Shen in the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), we find the following passage:

> The simple graph (*wen* 文) is the fundamental image of things. The complex graph (*zi* 字), on the other hand, means "to give birth" (*zi* 孳). It procreates and multiplies.[24]

Xu Shen's distinction between *wen* and *zi* was essentially a morphological one, intimately bound up with his famous "Six Laws of Character Formation" (*liushu*), in which he classified the morphology of complex graphs into six basic structural patterns.[25] *Wen*, on the one hand, is morphologically simple, forming an indivisible graphic unit that purportedly entertains an iconic relation to the

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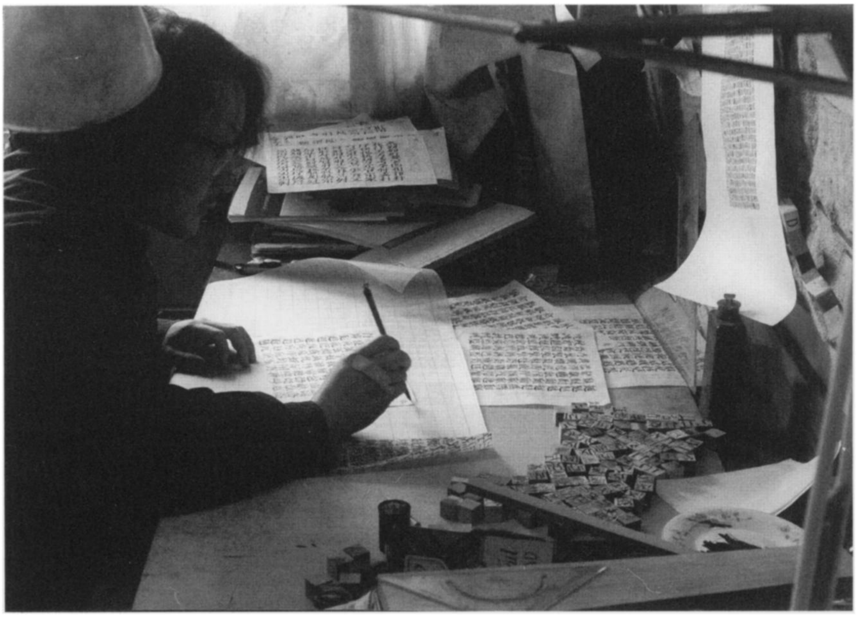
22. Wang Tiande and Chambers Fine Art (Gallery), *Made by Tiande*, exh. cat. (New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2004).
23. Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 37.
24. Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 754 (15A/2a–b).
25. Tetsuji Atsuji, *Kanjigaku: Setsubun kaiji no sekai* (Tokyo: Tōkai daigaku shuppankai, 1985), 114.



Xu Bing creating fake characters for *A Book from the Sky* at his studio, 1987
(photograph © Xu Bing)

shapes of things. Zi, on the other hand, is composite, consisting of two or more simpler graphs combined according to one of the six morphological patterns. The above passage thus serves to highlight an unexpected connection between what is usually taken to be a purely classificatory system of existing characters and a notion of graphic fertility, thereby further entrenching the radical collapse between nature and culture.[26] The totality of existing graphs is the product of a regulated process in which simpler graphs mate to form complex ones, and it is such a law of procreation that grounded the classification system of Xu Shen's dictionary.

Evidently, the corpus of actual graphs is always enmeshed in the messy history of words and their uses, and the referential responsibility of Xu Shen as lexicographer inevitably frustrated his project to uncover a coherent system of graphic fertility beneath the daunting heterogeneity of existing characters. This impossible dream, however, also proved to be a tenacious one, resurfacing throughout Chinese history in a multitude of cultural milieus and metamorphosing into myriad forms of character interpretations.[27] Placed at the tail end of this curious genealogy, Xu Bing's grand cosmo-graphy may perhaps be seen as the delusory realization of the millennia-old, frustrated dream, one finally actualized by allowing pseudocharacters to devour the entire cosmos.

Nonsense?

Such a reading of *A Book from the Sky*, however, flies in the face of the prevailing interpretations that perceive the work under the sign of sterility rather than fertility. Virtually all critics unconditionally accept the ground characterization of the pseudocharacters as *nonsense* writing.[28] Thus, allegorizing critics read into the evacuation of meaning an essentially political, critical intent, one targeting the oppressiveness of either culture in general, the Chinese tradition more specifically, or the Communist regime.[29] The anti-allegoricists instead recognize

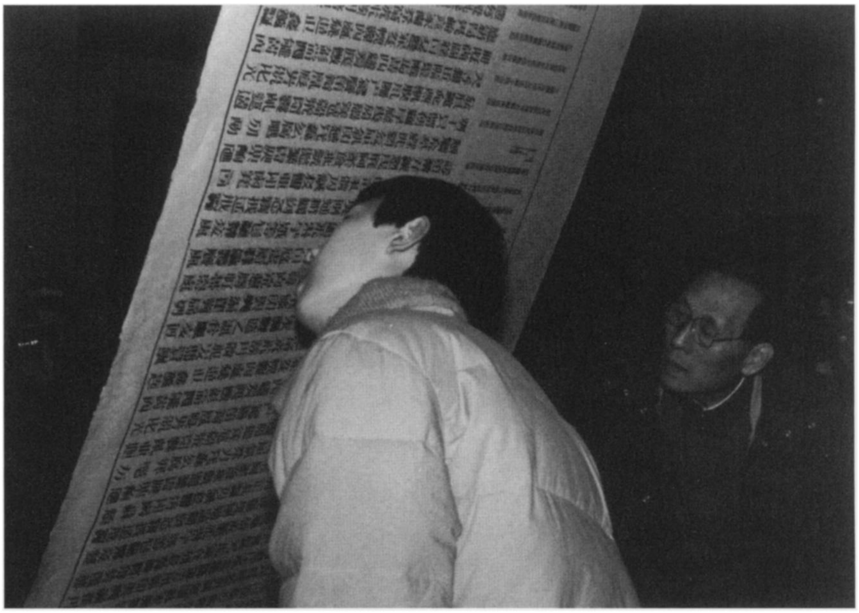
[26] On the fertility of characters in the *Shuowen* and its cosmological underpinning via the *Classic of Changes*, see Lewis, 272–74.

[27] Takeda Masaya presents an overview of this fascinating history in his *Sōketsu tachi no utage: kanji no shinwa to yūtopia* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1994).

[28] Wu Hung's informed translation of the term *tianshu* as "nonsense writing," in "A 'Ghost Rebellion': Notes on Xu Bing's 'Nonsense Writing,'" *Public Culture* 6, no. 2 (1994): 411, does not necessarily contradict my reading of the efficacy of the pseudocharacters, for the term's colloquial meaning of "gibberish" is itself derivative of the more literal meaning of "heavenly script," cosmic writs (mostly Daoist) believed to have literally appeared in the sky. On this peculiar tradition, see, for example, Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-shan Tradition of the Great Purity*, trans. Julian F. Pas and Norman J. Girardot (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and Lü Pengzhi, "Zaoqi lingbaojing de tianshu guan," in *Daojiao jiaoyi yu xiandai shehui* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003).

[29] Martina Köppel-Yang presents a nuanced version of this perspective in her *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979–1989; A Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 169–71.

Visitors viewing *A Book from the Sky*, 1988,
China Art Gallery, Beijing (photograph © Xu Bing)



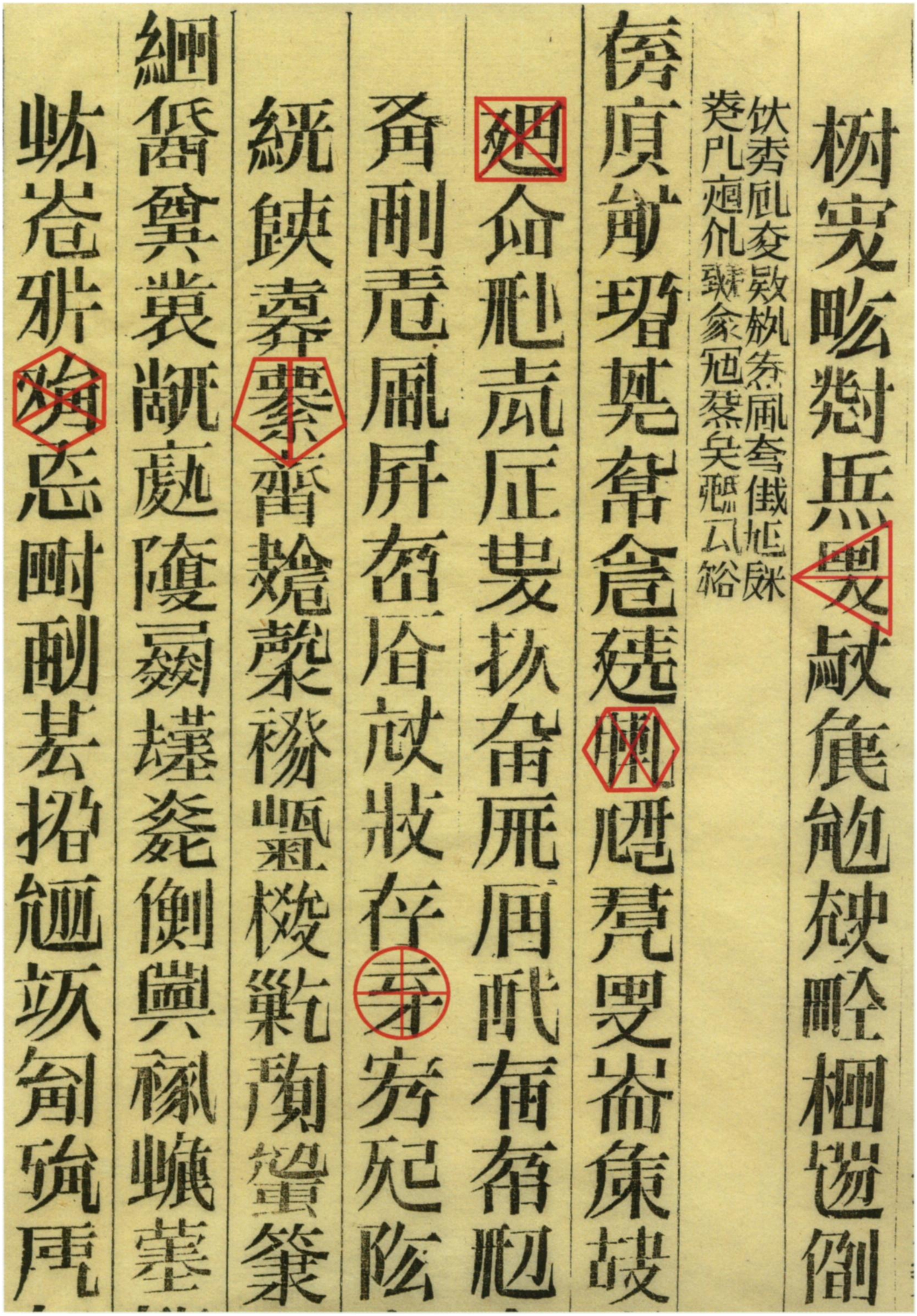
in the "nonsense" characters the realization of the "open text," the archetypally postmodern figure of the freedom of the reader.

Such a convergence of what are otherwise diametrically opposed readings is enough to alert us to an entrenched interpretive paradigm operating beneath the apparent divergence. Uniting the readings is the familiar communication model of meaning, a model defining meaning at the intersection of intention and reception. The two readings simply highlight one or the other end of this communicative chain. But falling through the cracks of such a communication-centered model is the agency of the graph, its intrinsic capacity to produce and reproduce itself and its signification. It is symptomatic that the prevailing interpretations fail to closely examine *A Book from the Sky*'s pseudocharacters in their concrete forms and structures, instead glossing them over abstractly as at once meaningless, painstakingly crafted, or beautiful. But it is precisely the tangible being of individual graphs that propels Xu's cosmo-graphy, their vitalistic capacity orchestrating the work's vortex of graphic procreation and regeneration.

A closer look at the graphs reveals their profoundly riveting nature, as illustrated by the enthralled viewers at the first public show of the work in Beijing in 1988. For those familiar with the Chinese script, to look at Xu's pseudocharacters is a tantalizing experience, one that mixes enchantment with frustration. The graphs frustrate because they are meaningless in the precise sense that they fail as "logographs," as modern linguists put it (in emphatic opposition to the notion of the ideograph).[30] Xu's pseudocharacters fail as writing not because they do not correspond to meanings directly (the real Chinese script does not do so either), but because they do not correspond to any known words and are hence bound to remain unpronounceable and unfathomable. Yet the same failed characters enchant because the un-logographic pseudocharacters are nonetheless perpetually on the cusp of signification. That a graph devoid of lexical support can nevertheless be compelling is one of the most intriguing insights that Xu's work brings about.[31] The task of distinguishing combinations

[30] For standard linguistic critiques of the conception of the Chinese script as ideography, see Alleton, 187–95; William G. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1994), 3–24; and DeFrancis, 133–48.

[31] I want to underscore the significance of what John Cayley called the "eminent legibility" of Xu's installation, albeit primarily in reference to the print formats. See his "Writing (Under-)Sky: On Xu Bing's *Tianshu*," in *A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections about the Book and Writing*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (New York: Granary Books, 2000), 498–500.



Xu Bing, page in *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91, with red marks added by the author (artwork © Xu Bing) of elements that somehow make sense as graphs from those that do not was a central preoccupation of the artist during his yearlong seclusion. At stake here is thus not an extraneous consideration for aesthetically pleasing forms unrelated to semantics as such, but rather a sensibility that presumes an intrinsic connection between morphology and meaning, something akin to the ideographic fantasy that modern linguists took such pain to discredit.

In his insightful treatise on the Chinese art of writing, Jean-François Billeter emphasizes that a well-formed character should possess an organic autonomy: "Like the organism, which in the realm of nature is a relatively complete and closed system, independent of its surroundings, the character has to constitute, in the realm of forms, a system that is relatively complete, closed and independent of the surrounding space; by its form, it should be the equivalent of a living being."[32] To achieve this goal, the writing hand needs to adhere to several formal rules, such as: 1) to fit the character in an imaginary square (as opposed to the roman alphabet, which unfolds across a horizontal line); 2) to give the character a center of gravity; 3) to give the character a "silhouette," as clean an outline as possible; 4) to integrate the distinct parts of a complex character by adjusting the relative size and density of the different parts. While Billeter's rules apply primarily to calligraphy (i.e., handwriting), they provide useful yardsticks to measure the well-formedness of printed characters—and, indeed, of Xu's pseudocharacters as well. Their morphological soundness and general conformity to the organic morphology of real characters become apparent when one simply marks their outlines and centers, as in the illustration here.[33] These centered, proportioned, and clean silhouettes are what lend body to characters and pseudocharacters alike, what Billeter aptly calls the character's "body sense."[34]

Further extending the organic and naturalizing analogy, we may compare this experience of significant form to that of the face. Well-formed graphs congeal into a countenance, whereas ill-formed ones do not, and this unity of mien is what confers a halo of meaningfulness to Xu's pseudocharacters. At the same time, the physiognomic expressivity of graphs frustrates the beholder, because their evocative aspects refuse to conform to the fixity of the lexicon. They cannot be named. This is probably what the artist meant when he said that his pseudowriting has a face but has no voice.[35]

The face, the philosopher Georg Simmel suggests, is the empirical paradigm for synthesis.[36] It is the experience of the Kantian "unity of multiplicity" in the here-and-now of perception, one in which the vagaries of constantly moving parts crystallize, immediately and tangibly, into the coherence of a countenance. To recognize a graph in the outlandish recombination of graphic parts is an experience comparable to such a physiognomic recognition. This is a pregnant analogy, especially because much of the meaning the viewer finds in Xu's graphs in fact derives from the multitude of associations triggered by their components as well as their overall shapes. Character elements incorporated in the pseudocharacter evoke a quality (e.g., "water," "sharpness," or "enclosure"), and similarity with existing graphs adds further layers of connotations, both semantic and phonetic. A pseudocharacter "makes sense" when the myriad connotations without denotation congeal into the coherence of a mien.

Some examples are in order. The first character shown here is a rather

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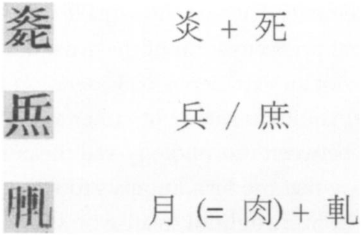
[32] Jean-François Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*, trans. Jean-Marie Clarke and Michael Taylor (New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 1990), 29.

[33] There are a few ways in which the pseudographs can deviate from the morphological norm, which will be discussed later.

[34] Billeter, 33.

[35] Xu quoted in the wall text for the exhibition *Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing* at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, DC, 2001.

[36] Georg Simmel, "The Aesthetic Significance of the Face," in *Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959).



Semantic and phonetic "resonances" of pseudocharacters from Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91 (artwork © Xu Bing; diagram by the author)

obvious example of a successful semantic convergence of parts, showing the character for "flame/aflame" (炎) sitting above the character for "death" (死). The next pseudocharacter is somewhat more subtle, seamlessly fusing two existing characters into a graph that evokes an equally successful semantic fusion: the character *bing* (兵) stands for "soldier" and *shu* (庶) for either "numerous" or "common, lowly"; their combination suggests something like a swarm of foot soldiers, an association reinforced by the increased number of dots at the bottom. The third and most poignant example combines the common element (or "key," *bushou*) that is often found in characters having to do with the flesh (月). On the right is the character for "to press, to crush, to flatten." The painful pseudocharacter that results from their combination would probably be pronounced something like *ya* or *zha*, following the character on the right, since in existing characters of the same structure, the right-side elements usually bear phonetic information. The "sound(s)" further reinforce(s) the painful "meaning" of the pseudocharacter, since it puns with a host of such similar words as "to push" (*ya* 押), "to (op)press" (*ya* 壓), "to squeeze" (*zha* 搾), "to explode" (*zha* 炸), and so on.

Such an analysis necessarily remains tentative, given the more or less subjective nature of such associations. My point is not to claim that the above exhausts the whole gamut of semantic and phonetic associations that may have crossed the artist's mind as he designed each pseudocharacter or may cross the mind of the viewer plowing through the arcane graphic terrain. My aim is rather to suggest that the myriad associations evoked by Xu's little square graphs seem to gravitate toward a certain kernel, as much semantic and phonetic as morphological. The body of the character is a signifying one as well, albeit more like a face than like a name.

This immanence of meaning in the body of the character might have been what Paul Claudel had in mind when he famously stated that whereas alphabetic writing flees across the horizon, characters always face us. With this pithy formulation, he makes it abundantly clear why the agency of the graph in *A Book from the Sky* is fundamentally at odds with such poststructuralist figures of graphic materiality as Jacques Lacan's "agency of the letter" or Jacques Derrida's "trace," notwithstanding the insistence of some critics to the contrary. For what these poststructuralist figures variously seek to evoke is a presence of absence, a flurry of fugitive associations rapidly shifting from one sign to another to form what Lacan called the metonymic chain.[37] In contrast, the web of associations deployed around the pseudocharacter is *immanent*: just as the coherence of the multitude of movements animating the face is inevitably felt to be the expression of a coherent interiority, the numerous associations crowding the pseudocharacter are felt to spring from its inner kernel. If poststructuralist signification inhabits the interstices between signs, the signification of the pseudocharacter instead emanates from within the fertile center of the graph's tangibly compact being. Despite its insistent deconstructive gestures (and *pace* Derrida's critique of the book as containment of the trace), poststructuralism remains a thinking of the book, the linear discourse (albeit multilinear), the fugitive breath of mean-

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37. Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967); Jacques Lacan, "L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud," in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

38. See Ernst Robert Curtius's authoritative historical account of the notion of the world as book in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 302–47.

39. John Lagerwey, "The Oral and the Written in Chinese and Western Religion," in *Religion und Philosophie in Ostasien*, ed. Gert Naundorf, Karl-Heinz Pohl, and Hans-Hermann Schmidt (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1985), 304.

40. One might pursue the analogy between Xu's installation and the Daoist conception of heavenly scriptures further by suggesting a Daoist subtext for the installation's contrast between the unbound unity of the vast scroll hanging from above and the multitude of bound volumes beneath. This forms an interesting parallel to the constitutive opposition inherent in Daoist conception of holy scriptures: the transmitted texts of the scriptures are but degraded versions of the "real writs" that literally materialize in the sky—invisible and illegible to the ordinary eye and certainly not bound. See references in note 28.

41. See Lewis, 274–75; and Anthony C. Yu, "Cratylus and Xunzi on Names," in *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking through Comparisons*, ed. Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 239.

42. *Bohutong shuzheng*, ed. Chen Li (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 12.567.

ing.[38] The Chinese graphic regime, in contrast, is the regime of script, graphic faces whose countenances and constellations maintain their unique and block-like coherence even as they respond to and intersect with one another. John Lagerway's insightful remarks on the unity of the cracks on ancient oracle bones, Daoist scriptures, and Chinese writing applies equally to Xu's pseudocharacters: "[The cracks] remind us that the original Chinese text is not linear and does not constitute a book. . . . Cracks on oracle bones and Taoist real writs do not represent . . . something outside of themselves; they are disclosures of patterns (*wen*[q]), revelation of structures (li[l])."[39] Xu's "books" are in fact such heavenly writs (as the Chinese term *tianshu* may be rendered), for which the linear closure of the book remains alien.[40]

A phenomenon as mundane as the pun may offer a better approximation for the signification of the pseudocharacters than the trace or the metonymic chain, for its associative effects are inexorably entangled with the palpable stuff of words. Xu's pseudocharacters emerge at the intersections of graphic puns: morphological resemblances, repetitions, and overlaps converging on each of those curiously evocative ciphers. Such a collapse between signification and pun also finds interesting historical analogue in one of the peculiarities of early Chinese commentaries and lexicographic works that continue to perplex the modern Sinologist. For a similar drive to anchor meaning in the tangible thickness of the written word governs the predilection for paronomastic glosses in Han dictionaries and canonical commentaries.[41] In these curious glosses, similarities in sound or shape equally constitute the basis for punning understood broadly. For example, a passage from the Han Confucian text *Bohutong* expounds on the compound term "ancestral shrine" (*zongmiao*) via auditory proximity: *zong* puns with the word "to respect" (*zun*) and *miao* puns with the word "countenance" (*mao*).[42] The commentary thereby derives the core function of a shrine (i.e., "the place to house the image/face of the ancestor for worship") from the graphs' auditory associations.

Some may question my direct linkage between Xu's pseudocharacters and the Han paronomastic glosses, pointing to the difference of perceptual registers separating the two. A pun, after all, is about sound, which is one sense that is presumably renounced in Xu's graphs. It would then appear as though the Han exegetes, unlike the contemporary artist, resorted to speech as their primary matrix of associations. To infer thus, however, would be to smuggle in a quintessentially modern presupposition about language and its relation to the senses. Sense discrimination is irreducible for linguistics because the modern and/or Western definition of what properly belongs to language centrally turns on it. The massive body of deconstructive critiques in the wake of Derrida's *Grammatology* has brought to light the overdetermined nature of the speech-script distinction, allied with global claims about signification, subjectivity, and the *logos*. Han exegesis compels us to suspend this dense cultural formation and to turn our eyes to an equally dense but different cultural formation, one that centers on the graph as multisensory block-unit of signification. Sound ceases to index the ontologically autonomous sphere of speech, distinct from the realm of writing, instead neighboring shape as an equally constitutive component of the discrete graph-word. This is why in Han canonical commentaries, just as in Xu's work, paronomastic glosses are

中 + 心 = 忠

Structure of the character for "loyalty" (*zhong*) (diagram © the author) found side by side with glosses that treat characters as rebuses. For instance, the word "loyalty" (*zhong* 忠) is explained in another Han-dynasty text as "one whose heart-mind (*xin* 心) holds one center (*zhong* 中; puns with 'loyalty')."[43] The combination of these two graphs indeed yields the graph for "loyalty." Here, as in *A Book from the Sky*, no firm line separates visual similitude and intersections from auditory ones; together they form the tangible stuff of the written word to which Han commentators and contemporary artist alike seek to anchor all meaning.

The logic of similitude underlying the puns of ancient commentators may appear to lend support to the notion of pictography, as some have attempted to show.[44] The pictography hypothesis, however, fails to capture the real magnitude of the authority accorded to writing in early Chinese reflections. In fact, one-to-one correspondences of whatever type between individual graphs and real things appear to have been only of marginal, ad hoc significance for the ancient Chinese reflections on writing.[45] That writing encapsulates the immanent order of the world was a given that required no further justifications. In this sense, writing formed an essentially closed system. If a certain notion of likeness nonetheless legislated the relationship between writing and the world, the vector pointed in the opposite direction. Instead of likeness anchoring writing to the world, it was the world that was invested in writing and transfigured into its likeness. Facts of writing were ipso facto facts of the world, but not necessarily the other way around. Hence the perennial importance of the pun. The dazzling choreography of graphic mirroring and resonance orchestrated by puns at once defined processes of signification and of the world, rendering moot the distinctions between meaning and being and between nature and culture.

Toward a History of the Graphic Regime

It is this sense of total closure, the claustrophobic autonomy of the Chinese cosmo-graphy, that Xu's *Book from the Sky* captures with such poignancy. The world of real things evaporates there, leaving a world composed only of writing. Bringing the collapse of meaning and being to its absurd but logical end, its ten thousand graphs supplant the ten thousand things of the universe to enact a mad dance of a cosmo-graphic system that blindly turns on itself but articulates nothing. What we witness in the universe of *A Book from the Sky* is the modus operandi of the graphic regime laid bare, the stubborn operations of the regime qua naked regime.

But if the work demonstrates the fundamental structure of the graphic regime, it also divulges something about the singular manner in which the artist inhabits this graphic universe, the marginal vantage point from which the totality of the regime's empty automatism becomes visible as such. It is a marginality that reminds us, for example, of the awed and perplexed gaze the peoples at the margins of Chinese civilization might have cast on the graphic universe of the Chinese "center." In particular, it is reminiscent of the Xixia script (as many have noted when first confronted with a page from Xu's *Book*), invented in 1036 CE by the first ruler of the inner Asian kingdom of Xixia.[46] The Xixia script is one of many Chinese-inspired writing systems invented at the four corners of the East Asian cultural sphere (e.g., Vietnam, Mongolia, Manchuria), where possessing

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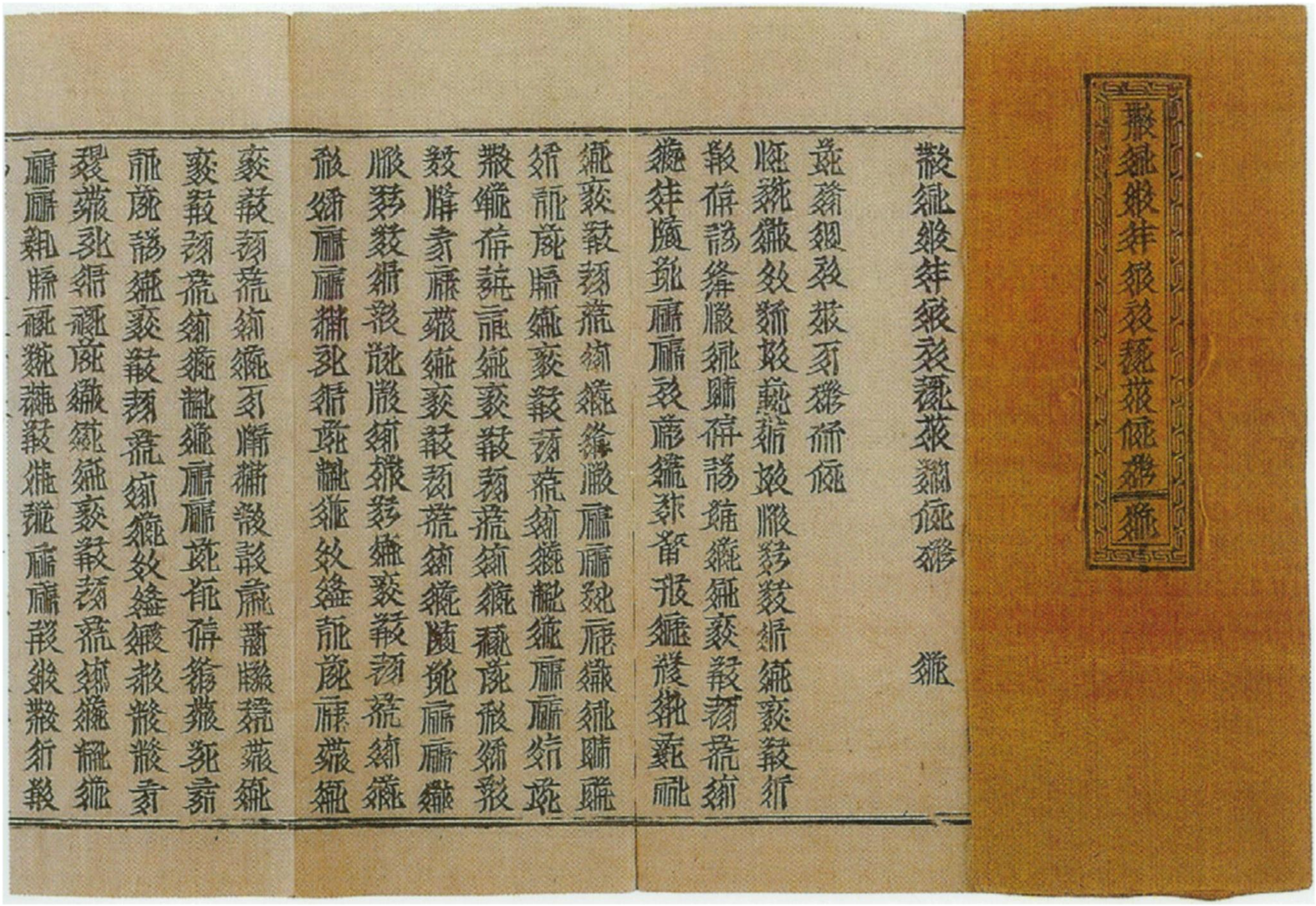
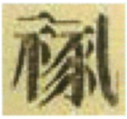
43. Dong Zhongshu, *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 51.346.
44. Lewis, 271.
45. Thomas Lamarre, *Uncovering Heian Japan: An Archaeology of Sensation and Inscription* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 128–30.
46. Harrist, 25



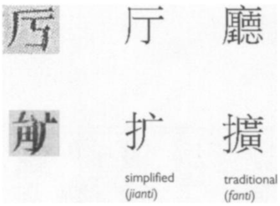


Cover and first pages of the *Huayan Sutra*, translated into Xixia, mid-fourteenth century, wooden movable-type print, concertina binding. Collection of the Department of Literature, Kyoto University (artwork in the public domain)

Xu Bing, character in *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91 (artwork © Xu Bing)

a script of one's own satisfied far more than a people's practical communicative needs; it was tantamount to a claim to membership in civilization and, hence, the expression of the burning desire to possess an imperial cosmo-graphy of one's own. It is tempting to imagine the artist inhabiting the graphic regime like an eleventh-century Inner Asian "barbarian" might have done, devising a graphic universe all his own, but which turns up as hostile and inhospitable as the one he mimics. In fact, something of this hostility is captured in one of the few ways in which Xu's pseudocharacters sometimes deviate from the morphological norm of real characters, namely in their excessively complex and aggressively thistly shapes, characteristics prominently featured in the Xixia script as well. The pompous prickliness of Xu's overloaded pseudocharacters capture something of those (pseudo-)empires' admixture of yearning for and fear of China's towering cultural presence. Nietzsche might have perceived in such an ambivalence the *ressentiment* of the marginal kingdoms toward China's massively civilizing power—albeit a militarily rather vulnerable power—most emblematically embodied in the intimidating universe of the Chinese script.

As tempting as this possible alliance with the geocultural margins of the Chinese civilization may be, however, this is not the only form of marginality *A Book* evokes vis-à-vis the graphic empire. Indeed, one of the less assertive—and perhaps less deliberate—ways in which some characters of *A Book* deviate from the norm may turn out to be symptomatic of the actual vantage the work



Xu Bing, detail showing similarities between pseudocharacters and "simplified" (*jianti*) characters in *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91 (artwork © Xu Bing)

tacitly assumes vis-à-vis the regime. Unlike the graphic overload of the Xixia-like characters, these other characters peculiarly lack density, as gaping white holes upset the otherwise finely calculated graphic poise and equilibrium of Xu's pseudoscript. Their graphic sparseness brings to mind the hollowness of the modern "simplified" (*jianti*) characters, the official script of the People's Republic of China, systematized by the Communist government in the 1950s and based partly on traditional forms of calligraphic and typographic abbreviations.

The establishment of simplified characters, with their fewer strokes and radical reduction of formal complexity, was primarily aimed at promoting literacy by making the script easier to memorize; seen more broadly, however, the simplification of script dovetails with the language-reform movements that sprung up in the wake of the Republican Revolution of 1911 and the collapse of the Qing dynasty it brought about. Proposals for simplification continued to figure prominently in most intellectual and policy debates on and programs for the modernization of Chinese society and culture. The radical proposals variously sought to unburden the Chinese language of its heavy graphic baggage by abolishing the characters and replacing them with alphabetic romanization, by inventing some artificial phonetic script more suited to the Chinese language, or—in extreme cases—by abandoning the language altogether and replacing it with Esperanto.[47] Despite their diversity, the radical and often fantastic proposals and polemics all aimed at breaking out of what modern intellectuals perceived to be a stiflingly dense and massive scriptural burden.

By unassumingly planting graphs and graph-parts evocative of modern simplified characters on the otherwise emphatically "traditional" pages of his books, Xu advertently or inadvertently acknowledges the work's underlying affinity with this modernizing desire to stand outside the closure of the graphic empire. At the same time, the almost seamless way in which these anomalous graphs blend into their antique typographic and xylographic environment has the ironic effect of recouping modern (anti-)graphic sensibility back into the closure of the graphic regime, thereby betraying the surreptitious persistence of the regime at the very heart of linguistic modernism. For in their passion and obsession with the negation of writing, both the language reformers and the contemporary experimental artists end up perpetuating the very authority of writing that they sought and still seek to undermine—so much so as to virtually collapse the difference between reforming writing and reforming language.[48]

Such ambiguities and ambivalences of Chinese linguistic modernism are what *A Book from the Sky* crystallizes in its absurdist magnificence. It is here that we begin to confront the historicity of the work in the strict sense of the term. For in its very ability to expose the graphic regime as a system that articulates nothing but its own operations, *A Book* acknowledges its own fundamental modernity. *A Book from the Sky* is a modern allegory in the sense in which Walter Benjamin defined the term: an allegory of the allegorical apparatus as such.[49] If the graphic pun and paronomastics of the Han commentators and lexicographers served to invest lexical meaning in the palpable density of graphs, it is by divesting the graphic regime of its entanglement with the lexicon that *A Book from the Sky* presents cosmo-graphy in its bare systematicity. No longer a fact of the world, the work becomes a world apart—a utopia—where cosmo-graphy is exposed as what it always was but never recognized itself to be: a regime.

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[47] Standard English-language accounts of these reform movements are found in John DeFrancis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* (New York,: Octagon Books, 1972); and Richard C. Kraus, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 75–108.

[48] On the persistent primacy of writing in modern Chinese language-reform movements, see Murata Yūjirō, "'Bunpaku' no kanata ni: kindai chūgoku ni okeru kokugo mondai," *Shisō* 853 (1995).

[49] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1985).

The visibility of the regime qua regime afforded by a work like *A Book from the Sky* is what enables us to conceive a history of the graphic regime. In the optics of this privileged perspective, the history will figure as a history of blindnesses, a history of a regime that persisted in misrecognizing itself as the world. But if the efficacy of a regime is predicated on such an entrenched misrecognition, the insight of Xu's *Book* perhaps also signals the beginning of an end. In a sense, and despite fervent cultural and political efforts over more than a century to modernize the Chinese language, the modernity of Chinese writing is just beginning, and we do not yet know what new forms of articulation between writing and the world will emerge in what promises to be a protracted process of ending. Yet, insofar as its trajectory will be a function of the sedimentary graphic investments of the world that it will have to undo, the history of the graphic regime remains a history of the present.

Hajime Nakatani is an assistant professor in the departments of East Asian studies and art history and communication studies at McGill University, where he teaches East Asian art history and visual culture. His publications include articles on traditional Chinese painting and writing, Japanese *manga*, and comparative semiotics. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript on the cultural history of writing and calligraphy in early medieval China.