

**Made in Heaven (Assembled in China):
Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* and the Chinese Copy**

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I. The Emperor Wears Such Lovely Clothes

On the back of my iPhone—sleek, beautiful, expensive—read the words: “Designed by Apple in California.” And then: “Assembled in China.” “Designed” implies creativity. We are given the company who did the designing, even the American state in which that designing occurred. But it was “assembled”—rote, skill-less, even un-human—“in China,” that massive country. These simple sentences, emblazoned on a device that sits in every pocket, broadcast a certain conceit about the world: the seat of skill, of creativity, of innovation, it says, is in the West. The labor is in China.

The West has defined itself for centuries against an Other that it perceives as static, undeveloped, backward.¹ In contrast, it was flexible, inventive, rational. But the U.S., a fledgling nation that rose out of the Western tradition, finds itself now in a ferocious economic competition with China—the victor, in a re-staging of the Cold War, gets to proclaim its own characteristics essential virtues of a superior system. China, a nascent power that by some metrics has already surpassed the United States economically, is a country with a fundamentally different set of structuring principles from the U.S. It is socialist (at least nominally) rather than capitalist. Its millennia-old history is half-myth by virtue of age, while America scrambles to self-mythologize in light of a history too young to obscure. The United States, however, is in full possession of the critical frontier of soft power. Every nation in the world imports American movies, listens to American music, devours American culture. The U.S. imports the cultural production of other countries only sparingly. High art is no different.

A crucial premise of this paper is that very assertion: *high art is no different*. The forces that shape history and geopolitical events, according to this view, designate tastes in art. In the West, the enshrining of the individual genius capitalist leads to the dream of the solo, innovative artist. Apple, a company with a hundred thousand employees, *is* Steve Jobs, clad in the iconic black turtleneck and wire-rimmed glasses. Amazon is Jeff Bezos; Facebook is Mark Zuckerberg. In the same way, high art dissolves collective labor into the figurehead of the solo genius. Mark Rothko, the tortured master of American abstraction, had assistants stain his canvases. Andy Warhol, a character, trickster, but ultimate truth-teller, called his workshop “the Factory.”

The edifice of contemporary art as built by the West depends on the maintenance of a complicated, increasingly tenuous premise: that in the work of art there is still something called the aura,² some indelible mark of the soul, that can survive the assault of technology, the delegation of the labor of making, the capacity of infinite and immaculate reproduction. This myth is guarded by copyright law, by limited edition prints, by the role of museums—in short, by safekeeping the ideal of the original.

The specter of China, land of the cheap copy, is an incipient threat to this narrative. The Chinese tech giant Huawei recently came under fire for stealing trade secrets and for patent infringement. Huawei also recently surpassed Apple to become the world’s second-largest smartphone manufacturer.³ Dafen Village, a loose collection of workshops just outside the Chinese megacity of Shenzhen, is notoriously the biggest producer of handmade oil paintings in the world, churning out millions of copies of Western masterworks.⁴ Most of these paintings work their way to humdrum sites of low culture—the walls of cheap motels, middle-class homes,

mediocre restaurants. But some, it is rumored, have fooled even the gaze of experts and infiltrated Western museums. Herein lies the shadowy power of the copy: if you can't tell it's a counterfeit, what does that say about the original? What does it say about the value system that holds it in place?

Xu Bing is one of the Chinese darlings of the West-dominated art critical establishment. *Book from the Sky*, one of his earliest works, is the very image of the “good” Chinese artwork (fig. 1). A book impeccably traditional—except that every character within it is nonsense—it references easily-digestible clichés of Chinese-ness, and appears to denounce Chinese censorship. *Book from the Sky*, however, is not what it seems. Section II, “A Book from the Heavens,” teases out some of the ways both the *Book* and its artist digress from or complicate dominant narratives through the enacting of a complex camouflage. Section III, “A History of Mimesis in Three Modules,” argues that the ambiguity of *Book from the Sky* allows it to be situated within two distinct and irreconcilable traditions of the copy, the Chinese and the Western, and demonstrates how capitalism shaped the contemporary perception of the “good” high art object. Section IV, “A Mirror of Desire,” unpacks the Elvehjem Museum’s influential Orientalist reading of Xu Bing, and argues that *Book from the Sky*, through its mimicry of the “good” Western art object, achieves a sort of agency. In its aping of the “good” Chinese art object and its infiltration of the high art establishment, it perturbs the fixity of the Western value system like a sleeper agent, subtly undermining the very principles on which that system depends: authenticity, originality, individuality, Western superiority.

II. A Book from the Heavens

“To steal a book is an elegant offense.”
 - Chinese saying of unknown provenance

Xu Bing’s 1987 work *Book from the Sky* lovingly adheres to all the conventions of traditional Chinese book-making. It is bound with six-hole stitch-binding, a technique reserved for high-quality, important books (fig. 2). Its cover—not the yellow, brocaded silk of an imperial work but a simple, deep cobalt—marks it as a canonical or literary work; a serious work, not an artistic or imperial indulgence (fig. 3). Set within a volume of four and fitted in a walnut-wood case seamlessly joined, its format is traditional, with Chinese-style solid black bullet points and systems of commentary (fig. 4); marginal notes printed in smaller type above the horizontal rule of the book (fig. 5); an inverted white-on-black character that denotes a different section (fig. 6) and a table of contents (fig. 7) headings of which match up to chapter headings within the book. A particular character marks the preface for the Book—or rather, we must assume that it does, because it crops up at the beginning of each volume (fig. 7a, 7b). Appraising this book through a system of formal relations is, in fact, the only recourse available to a “reader”: every single one of the 4,000 unique characters in *Book from the Sky* is a nonsense character, each one completely illegible.

Meticulously and laboriously planned and carved by Xu over a four-year period, each character of the *Book* faithfully accords with the internal conventions of “real” Chinese characters: density of stroke, frequency of appearance, the use of radicals (fig. 8). Xu, indeed, conceived of the experience of attempting to read *Book from the Sky* as “seeing someone whose face is familiar, but whose name you cannot remember.”⁵ First exhibited at the China Art Gallery in Beijing, its tempestuous reception thrust Xu immediately into national notoriety. The uncanny

familiarity of the Book's characters—and its total illegibility—incited uproar and disbelief, and prompted amateurs and experts alike to scour the text, looking for “real” characters (fig. 9). A Ph.D. student, a certain Mr. Stone, claimed to have identified two “real” characters in the text. One, however, was itself a historical forgery—Wuzong, of the Tang dynasty, concocted this graph without meaning or pronunciation sometime in the 800s CE. The other was an archaic graph that had long ago slipped out of the Chinese lexicon.⁶ But does the fact that a character existed at some point in the past make it a “real” character? Is something that exists with neither name nor meaning really “real”? *Book from the Sky*—in its construction, its reception, its intention, and its circulation—is a project of unsettling, making uneasy the idea of authenticity, the distinction between high and low, the original and the multiple, the capacity of a singular, all-encompassing narrative.

Xu had a particular image in mind when he conceived of *Book from the Sky*: he chose to mimic a Song-era (960 -1279 CE) book, knowing that it is exalted as the pinnacle of traditional Chinese book-making. He proclaimed that he had three dictates in creating *Book from the Sky*:

- 1.) This book would not perform the essential functions of a book; it would be empty of all content, and yet it would very much look like a book.
- 2.) The way of making the book through to its completion, would have to entail an authentic process proper to book making.
- 3.) In every detail, it would have to be precisely and rigorously executed (fig. 10)⁷

But he found—as we will in turn see in his own work—that authenticity is difficult to pin down, if it exists at all. None of the books printed during the Song era was actually printed in the Song typeface, *Songti* (宋体). They were printed instead in the regular style, *Kaiti* (楷体) (fig. 11).

Only during the Ming era (1368 - 1644 CE) did the *Songti* begin to appear. Xu believes this to be because in the early history of printing, scribes would carve woodblocks identically to the handwriting within manuscripts. “The carver wouldn’t deviate from the original,” he says. “That was his job.”⁸ As woodblock printing became more popular throughout the Song period, carvers began to work knives in turns that were smoother, more regular, and easier to execute. This eventually became in the Ming era what was known anachronistically as *Songti*. Xu claims that he chose to use *Songti*, the inaccurately named Ming-era font, rather than *Kaiti*, the font actually used during the Song era, because the *Kaiti* derives too heavily from the use of an individual hand. “Style is a kind of information with content,” Xu writes, “that would be contrary to the criterion of ‘emptiness’ in *Book from the Sky*.”⁹

This brings us to another “falsehood” involved in the making of the Book: Xu’s narrativizing of his own biography and the process of making *Book from the Sky*. He attempts to represent *Book* in his few writings as a kind of populist project. He chooses the *Songti* font because “The [*Songti*] was not devised by a single person, but evolved from the Song period.... As such, you could say it was ‘made in heaven.’”¹⁰ *Book from the Sky*, or “天书,” was also in some sense “made in heaven”—the word “天” can mean both “sky” and “heaven,” rendering “天书” “Book from the Heavens.” The Chinese name was itself popularly determined, cast upon the work by viewers of the work after its first exhibition—like the *Songti* not made by the individual hand, and thus in another sense “made in heaven.”

After *Book from the Sky* had attained prestige and broad critical praise, Xu wrote, “I just thought about those carved blocks,” going on to describe how he went back to the factory that had printed his books “to retrieve the blocks, and to see everybody.”¹¹ Upon learning that *Book from the Sky* was printed in movable type, a process so delicate and labor-intensive that it was quickly phased out in China, the founder of a London-based bookshop exclaimed, “You’re a genius!” But Xu wrote, in response, “I think, if anything, my experience... has made me a model worker.”¹²

Xu Bing, therefore, fully aligns himself with the masses, downplaying his role as elite artist. Xu’s biographical background, however, somewhat undermines this narrative. His mother headed the library at the prestigious Beijing University, while his father chaired the history department. Xu was raised surrounded by books in a household of intellectuals, and decided early on that he wished to attend the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts, the top arts school in the country. Xu’s denial of his elite upbringing is often marshaled as evidence that he is of a milieu paralyzed by the paradoxes of the Cultural Revolution, that the all-encompassing weaponization of language launched by the Chinese Communist Party and its still-continuing censorship wreaked such damage that he could never again speak forthrightly, that he must continue to deny his elite status.¹³ But Xu is not to be read so easily. To do research for the *Book*, Xu writes, he “feigned” knowledge of a bibliography to seem like a scholar. “With an honest, serious air,” he continues, he “turned pages and took notes as though [he] were no different from the other scholars present.”¹⁴ This is a complex language of camouflage with nested layers of

disguise—Xu, here, is an intellectual, presenting himself as a model worker, that in turn must disguise himself as an intellectual.

In the same way, something insidious and complex takes root in *Book from the Sky*. There are elements to *Book from the Sky* that disrupt his own stated desires of both making a book with “the style of a Song period edition, in full former attire,”¹⁵ and emptying the book of all content, especially the individual style of the solo artist. He purposefully altered the popular-determined *Songti* in *Book from the Sky*, for instance, compressing it slightly so that it is slightly squatter and denser (fig. 12). Additionally, he played with the modulated elements of Song-style books, manipulating the number of columns per page, the size and density of characters, and the printed area of each leaf, until he found them to be in “suitable relation for the book.”¹⁶ Indeed, this language of formal relations seems to prioritize the role of the artist-genius over the role of the collective, or of tradition. Xu claims that he desired to make a perfect copy of a Song book—but the individual hand, the individual style, the individual mind, clearly intruded.

Just as Xu dons the disguise of a model worker that is in turn disguised as a scholar, so too does close analysis of his three dictates evince the fact that he did not necessarily attempt to make a perfect replica of a Song-style work. Rather, he wanted the work to be “authoritative, with the style of a Song period edition, in full formal attire, and as such able to assume the guise and give a proper sense of culture.”¹⁷ He wanted, then, for the book to *look* like a Song period book with full authority, to disguise itself as such—while in reality being something very different. The original title of *Book from the Sky* perhaps reflected this desire: named “析世鉴—世纪末卷,” it was translated variously as “Mirror to Analyze the World—The Century’s Final

Volume,” “The Mirror of the World—An Analyzed Reflection of the End of This Century,” and “An Analyzed Warning to the World.”¹⁸ This title betrays something of the desire behind *Book from the Sky* that even cuts through the fickleness of translation. First, that the work was meant to be a mirror—a mimetic image, a copy of something else that looks exactly like it but is only surface, only image. Second, that the work was meant to reflect the world: to be in the image not only of a Song-style book, not even just of China, but of the whole world, something far more complex and all-encompassing. In that sense, it was fitting for *Book from the Sky* to have been renamed as such: it is the work of a mirror to reflect its viewers. It is also the nature of a mirrored image to not be what it appears.

The artistry of *Book from the Sky* is that a viewer reads in that cipher their own desire, making it almost endlessly multivalent. It is in this way that the work can connote rapture at the same time that it does derision: “天书,” in Chinese, along with “Book from the Heavens,” can also translate to “Nonsense Writing.” A more complete reading of *Book from the Sky*, therefore, demands an inquiry into the perspectives that color and construe it. In order to understand the reception and interpretation of Xu Bing, a Chinese artist, by a West-dominated critical art establishment, we have to attempt to situate Xu and *Book from the Sky* within the histories of two world-views that have collided full-force only recently.¹⁹ Only in the wake of that collision, precipitated by the force of globalization, the fall of the Socialist order, the victory of the democratic capitalist model, and the “New Cold War” between China and the U.S., can *Book from the Sky* realize its full mimetic potential.

III. A History of Mimesis in Three Modules

1 - To Own the Same Porcelain as the Emperor

The process of making *Book from the Sky* is, in one capacity, deeply Chinese. Modular production, or the subdivision of a process or product into smaller units that can then be reproduced and recombined to make new forms, has defined Chinese making for millennia. Xu Bing used a system of modular production to make *Book from the Sky*: the development of each of the nonsense characters was forged from the recombination of a set number of real radicals, and printed blocks were disassembled and recombined in a chase in order to print each new page (fig. 13).

In fact, the use of modular production in China can be traced back as far as the thirteenth century BCE in the construction of Chinese script, bronze casting, and architecture. The massively influential 9th Century BCE text *Yi Jing*, or *Book of Changes*, teaches how to build and represent complex ideas of nature through just the recombination of broken and unbroken lines (fig. 14). In the late centuries BCE, bronze casters began to reproduce identical parts for mass-produced weapons and for complicated components of chariots. From the fourth century CE, Buddhist painters and sculptors began producing great quantities of figures and scenes through the repetition and recombination of set motifs (fig. 15). With the invention of movable type around the 11th century CE, China began block-printing massive quantities of the Buddhist Canon. Indeed, the factory at which Xu printed *Book from the Sky* was printing an edition of *Da Zang Jiang*, or the *Buddhist Canon*, when he first arrived (fig. 16). And in 1577 CE, Jingdezhen—still the center of porcelain production in China today—received and fulfilled an imperial order for nearly 175,000 pieces of porcelain, a scale still impressive today.

In another link to contemporary China, the operation of modular production might in fact more aptly be called a factory—defined by its systematization, such as the organization of a workforce, division of labor, serial production, and standardization—over say, a workshop, which typically sees a small establishment run by a single master craftsman.²⁰ In China, factories, though sometimes privately-run, were often state-owned, an analog to the proximity the Chinese government maintains to production today. The manufacture of the terra-cotta army for Emperor Qin Shi Huang in the third century BCE, for instance, utilized both private and state-owned factories to fulfill its quota (fig. 17).²¹

State-owned and -mandated systems of modular production were put into place in China as a means to maintain political stability. The scholar Jason Steuber argues that the early Qin Dynasty²² emperors set about empire-building and securing territorial boundaries—the same ones in place today—through replication in fields like the visual arts, language, and architecture. They did this through the standardization of institutions: imperial printing houses, court-sponsored architectural projects, and lacquer, porcelain, and painting workshops.²³ If the imperial court could mandate cultural production, it could maintain a tighter grip on its expansive, heterogeneous land and people. In exchange for this control, Chinese art-production sacrificed, and continues to sacrifice, much: the richness of separate national literatures, the freedom of art-making—even some aspects of what is in the West considered human rights. “Indeed,” writes Lothar Ledderose, “modular systems are bound to curtail the personal freedom of the makers of objects, and the owners and users. Modular systems engender unbending restraints on society.”²⁴

Underlying the history of Chinese art is the philosophy that production and reproduction are systemic, concerned with a growth and development that echoes the evolution of nature, changing through gradual adjustments that emanated from a common source. During the sixth century CE, for instance, the critic Xie He codified the value of copying in the creative process in a crucial critical text in *Huihua Liufa*, or *Six Principles of Chinese Painting*: “Sixth, transmission by copying, this is to say the copying of models.”²⁵ This is echoed in the words of the scholar-artist Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322 CE) hundreds of years later when he opined that copying the great artworks of the past breathes life into tradition and guarantees the organic cultivation and continuation of a traditional culture.²⁶ China did not until very recently in its long history enshrine the individual, innovative artist. In workshops, names were engraved solely for reasons of quality control, and never to mark the work of the individual artist as his. Nor was China ever interested in verisimilitude that mirrored the surface of the natural world, a preoccupation of the West from the time of the ancient Greeks.

This is perhaps the reason that the idea of the copy has such a particular valence in China. Because the system of modular production allowed for a hierarchy of grade, the same workshops that created fine pieces for emperors could make attainable pieces for middle-class workers. The finest-quality pieces, then, were reserved for the top of the hierarchy, such as the imperial court, while the lesser-quality pieces would go to those less esteemed. But the works that went to the elite and the ones that went to the non-elite were all copies of the same thing: a middle-class worker could therefore boast that he owned the same porcelain as the emperor.²⁷ Despite the end of Imperial China, many of these ideas are still in play to this day. Indeed, that China is well-

known today as the chief purveyor of the cheap copy is fitting, given its roots. It is important to note, however, that fakes were never accepted. “Intention was everything,” writes Nick Pearce. “A copy was one thing, but a fake—a deception—was another.”²⁸

With *Book from the Sky*, in fact, Xu Bing attempted to reach a similarly extended circle of participants. He proposed, early on, for the *Book* to be printed as a regular paperback book by an established Chinese publisher, with all the trappings of an ordinary book, including an ISBN number. In this way, the work would find its way into libraries disguised as a typical book, “confound[ing] a wide audience which would not otherwise be exposed to such avant-garde ideas.” Mass reproduction of *Book from the Sky*, Xu argued, would “denigrate it, thus blurring the boundaries of ‘high art.’”²⁹ And yet, the circulation of *Book from the Sky* was instead constrained to 120 copies, with 100 numbered copies and 20 unnumbered artist’s proofs. *Book from the Sky*, in accordance with Xu’s wishes to dissolve the artist, has no author, no printer, no publisher. Therefore, the cartouche, the place on the reverse title-page where a printer or publisher’s colophon traditionally appears, should be left blank. On un-circulated copies of *Book* the cartouche is indeed blank. But on copies that have been sold, or otherwise disseminated, the cartouche bears Xu’s signature (fig. 18). What forces compelled this choice?

2 - Use Value and the Value of Uselessness

Art, writes the theorist Julian Stallabras, circulates within a “peculiar economy, based on the manufacture of unique or rare artefacts, and its spurning of mechanical reproduction.”³⁰ In an inversion of typical procedure within a capitalist economy, where high demand for a commodity drives up production and pulls down prices, the art market is a micro-economy in which the

actions of the select few—collectors, dealers, critics, curators—govern all facets of the economic process. This system works to imbue the work of art with a different sort of meaning than the meaning-as-use-value assumed in capitalism. The work of art flaunts its anti-labor, its labor as unspecialized, as free, purposeless play. Its intentional uselessness makes it definitionally a luxury in a world market driven by utility. Works of art, Stallabras argues, are then appealing because they offer the possibility of freedom from capitalism for the rich who can afford to purchase artwork and support art-making—and a whiff of that freedom for the poor, who toil most punishingly under its burden.

Powerful players within the art world, therefore, carve an enclave of freedom from venal commercial pressure. More accurately, though, they craft the simulacrum³¹ of such freedom—an image that conceals within it, like *Book from the Sky*, complications, ambiguities, and falsehoods.³² One strategy of maintaining the preciousness of the work of art is through constraining the production of works made in reproducible media. *Book from the Sky* is one such artwork. Made with paper and ink and printed with movable type—a technique invented for maximal duplication—it is clearly crafted in a reproducible medium, if a labor-intensively reproducible one. Its circulation as an art object, as a result, has been purposefully handicapped.

Xu's dream of a paperback *Book*, with an ISBN number and publisher, distributed freely in libraries, is virtually impossible to reconcile with its status as an object of high art. It follows that Xu's first—and, as far as I can find, only—mention of his desire to print a paperback *Book* appears in the catalog for his exhibition at the Elvehjem Museum at the University of Wisconsin, it being his first solo show in the U.S. A new transplant, fresh out of school, Xu may have been

oblivious to the mechanisms of the art market. It seems Xu's Duchampian dictate—"this will be a work of art because I, the artist, say it is such"—was not enough to redeem something so low as a library book into the realm of art. The paperback *Book from the Sky*, which renounces its status as a unique or rare artifact, which embraces mechanical reproduction, which spurns the peculiar economy of the art object, cannot be a work of art. This hypothetical object is therefore shunted into the degraded sphere of the normal capitalist economy. And if this "book" is then subject to the norms of capitalism, it cannot exist. It is a failed commodity. There is no use-value in an unreadable book.

The dream of the art world as a zone of freedom from capitalism contains a similarly self-annihilating premise. Though its economy functions differently, art is in a very significant sense not at all separate from capitalism. The market-value of "good" art has surged into the tens of millions. *Book from the Sky* regularly sold for around \$100,000 in the year 1994—now, it is listed forebodingly as "contact for price."³³ Massive amounts of money have been channeled into museums by wealthy individuals. It has become the exclusive domain of the extremely affluent to own well-known or -regarded artworks. High art is, in fact, likely the most egregious marker of class difference. The elitism of art has become not just economic but cultural, even moral, an elitism of taste. In the absence of durable rules for beauty, to own a piece of art is to stake a claim in some nebulous knowledge or feeling, to quite literally buy into the idea of art as necessary for its own sake. It is a particular, nearly absurd, act of faith. This phenomenon of art as a marker of cultural elitism is a particular heritage of the United States, that can trace its roots

to a long European history. Art, as we shall see, is not only subject to the rules of capitalism but to the forces of geopolitical events, of history, of nationalism. High art, as always, is no different.

3 - The West and the U.S.: On Faith Alone

“We use copies to certify originals, originals to certify copies, then we stand bewildered.”
-Hillel Schwartz

The seat of the Western art historical and aesthetic tradition is in Ancient Greece—of which little survives, it being carried largely into a historiographic consciousness by the Ancient Romans through the vehicle of copies. (The Greeks were a copying culture, too, producing copies long before the first century B.C.³⁴) Copying was essential to artistic activity of the time, and was seen as a method of recognizing the artistic talent of the source of the artwork, the master.³⁵

This idea became even more crucial during the Middle Ages, when illuminated manuscripts, books decorated with marginalia, illustrations, and initials, proliferated (fig. 19). During the Renaissance, an era launched by the rediscovery of Greek knowledge and ideals, the imitation again came to the fore. Pieter Bruegel left only forty-five paintings upon his death but was so popular that this small oeuvre generated a frenzy of copying—we count 123 extant versions of *Winter Landscape with Birdtrap* (fig. 20).³⁶ Inventories made after El Greco’s death list five or six versions of some of his most noteworthy works, “all of which the master could not have painted himself. They sold and still sell today as originals.”³⁷ The seventeenth century in turn saw a head-spinning amount of copying: Rubens copies Leonardo, Michelangelo, Mantegna and Raphaël; El Greco copies Michelangelo, too, but copies also Correggio, and Titian; Watteau, in turn, copies Rubens. Gérôme produced so many copies of his own works that Émile Zola

writes: “Mr. Gérôme... paints canvases and these are reproduced or printed in thousands of copies. The subject is everything, and the painting is nothing. Copies are worth more than the original.”³⁸

The status of the copy began to depreciate by the eighteenth century. The Romantic-era ideal of the genius-artist holed away in isolation rose to the fore. Photography, a medium that could make more exact copies than any human hand, was invented. And it was then, of course, that the U.S. gained independence, and had to reckon with forging its own cultural identity. This was a mantle taken up by the newly-minted elite, a class that had little in common. They owned different kinds of capital, worshiped different gods, varied in ancestral background, affiliated with different political parties. In the confusion of that nascent nation, they crafted a hazy notion of elitism characterized roughly and often arbitrarily by an emphasis on rationality, discipline, and individual effort. It was expressed by shared habits³⁹ and manners, preferences in interior design, definitions of “high culture,” and eventually institutionalized in clubs, debutante balls, and museums.⁴⁰ Like much else American, the idea of the American “elite” was almost entirely self-determined, more opted into than passed down.

The coming-of-age of the American museum is at the same time the sanctioning of the idea of the original and the expelling of the copy. Because of the newness of its own culture, American museums were necessarily filled with copies: handmade teaching copies of European oil paintings, plaster casts of sculptures, photographic reproductions of other (usually European) artworks.⁴¹ Soon, however, the use of the copy became controversial. The *New York Times* called on the planned Metropolitan Museum of Art to be a place for a “representative and continually

growing accumulation of the works of our own artists,” where “visitors from abroad could come to see what America is achieving in the fine arts, and not to turn away disappointed from the meager repetitions of what is familiar to them in the galleries of Europe.”⁴² Encoded in this language is the vision for a new American high culture built on novelty—this museum would be no pale imitation of Europe, and inside it there would be no copies.

The twentieth century saw East and West collide in full force in the form of World War. Though the United States began its cultural career looking askance at Europe, it rode the coattails of World War II to usurp it as the center of the art world. The Cold War art world was structured upon the fault line of East versus West, stoked by the cultural furor between the capitalist countries of the West and the socialist countries of the U.S.S.R. *Book from the Sky* rose out of this legacy of mutual antagonism. Each side in the East-West divide determined its high art to be the negative image of other: if Eastern art celebrated the achievements of socialism, then Western art honed in on the limits, failures, and cruelties of humanity, all while holding out faith “that art itself, in its very excavation of these troubles, may be an achievement in itself.”⁴³ We enter now into what political scientists have dubbed the “New Cold War,”⁴⁴ this time between the two massive economies of the U.S. and China, yet again between a high art supported by the state and one impeccably useless.

It is from this cultural landscape, rife with fragmentation, animus, and paradox, that Xu Bing emerged. Born in 1955 to an educated family just six years after the Communist Party seized power during the Chinese Civil War, Xu was christened by the Cultural Revolution, which saw the purging of his father and his own reeducation. When the Communist Party reversed its

stance on the educated elite, Xu attended the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), where he made *Book from the Sky*. Upon its negative reception by the Chinese government,⁴⁵ Xu fled to the U.S.; upon his international acclamation, the Chinese government welcomed Xu to repatriate as the new vice president of CAFA, the same institution he attended when he was expelled from the country.

Xu Bing, therefore, miraculously manages both to hold a lofty position in the international art critical establishment and to remain in the Chinese government's good graces. It is through the shrewd maintenance of silence that Xu pulls off this trick, allowing every side to read into his reticence its own best interests. In response to the Chinese government's arresting of Ai Weiwei, Xu told the *New York Times*, "I don't wish to comment on this." He added, "I still have to live there."⁴⁶ To the *Financial Times*, he opined, "I'm not really interested in politics, although I'm certainly interested in the human condition in general."⁴⁷

Unreadable, ineffable, silent, Xu Bing's words—or lack thereof—read just as ambiguously and illegibly as the book that first thrust him onto the international stage. The ambiguity of the *Book from the Sky* allows it to be government-sanctioned as the best of Chinese contemporary art at the same time that it is perceived elsewhere as the most incisive critique of it. It allows it to be read as anchored in Chinese tradition—constructed through modular production, forged through replication—and yet daringly novel, a requisite of the good Western museum object. It is the Chinese copy, enshrined in the Western museum which long ago disavowed the copy. *Book from the Sky*, a true mirror of the world, is the simultaneous image of two mutually-excluding desires, impossibly reconciled because of its very inscrutability.⁴⁸

IV. A Mirror of Desire

1 - The Elvehjem Museum

Of course, one may see whatever they like in a mirror of desire, but “neutrality” always favors the powerful. What did the West see when it peered into *Book from the Sky*? Must the work submit to whomever interprets it, meekly, mutely? Can the object speak back?

It’s 1991 in Madison, Wisconsin. It’s the first exhibition of Xu Bing in the U.S. There has been little yet written about this artist, newly arrived, and what exists does so nearly exclusively in Chinese. It is crucial to examine what occurred here, when American art historians wrote the first English narrative of Xu in the face of seas of unreadable text: in the form of history, of criticism, of cultural context, and within the *Book from the Sky* itself. It is also crucial when working with an artwork that appears to warn of the failures of text, its misreading or misuse, to tread carefully. To begin, one might tread literally.

From the great staircase in the Elvehjem Museum, a grand vision of the Great Wall, inked on paper, sweeps beneath your feet, hangs from the ceiling (fig. 21). You are in the heart of the museum, the point from which all else radiates. From this vantage point you can normally look into all the adjoining galleries, but now, great banners, inked with stones and turrets, block the way. What is normally light and air has been occluded. The work is called *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*. In the next room, with dark walls, a wooden floor, there is more inked paper: lined on the walls, on the floor (fig. 22). They go from light to dark, back to light again. This is *Five Series of Repetition*. Up close the image resolves into something pastoral, approaches lucidity, but always devolves. In the last, scrolls swoon from the ceilings. Sunlight permeates tepidly, pools where a

grid of books ripples neatly across the floor, as if arranged for worship. On either side of you, just as before, banners, this time large-format posters, line the walls. You feel a sense of claustrophobia in this temple-like room. Up close the banner resolves into characters, what look to be Chinese characters. Or else, they do not resolve. This is *Book from the Sky* (fig. 23-25).

Xu Bing's mode of meaning-making is obstinately elusive. That which is lost in the laborious translation of a miles-long structure bedecked with crags and extrusions into a paper-thin surface haunts *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (fig. 26). *Five Series of Repetition* veers asymptotically toward resolution and incoherence but never comfortably settles. And *Book from the Sky* proliferates in interpretation, drowning out clarity of meaning like so much garbled text. To someone who does not read Chinese but is familiar with its likeness, the text of the *Book* resolves into a Chinese text. The reader of Chinese, on the other hand, comprehends that its text looks to be Chinese but is not. *Book from the Sky* undermines a purely affective "reading" by inducing a particularity that reveals the paradox in the idea of a singular, generalized viewer.

The Elvehjem Museum catalog, seemingly unable to cope with the ambiguity of *Book from the Sky*, gropes for legibility in the text and fashions its own meaning where it cannot find it. Britta Erickson hones in on Xu's use of the five mark counting character, "正," used similarly to Western tally marks. Her text asserts that the character is used in counting votes, in small-scale elections, and not used in other contexts. This is a strikingly mistaken claim—the character is used to count anything, including by schoolchildren to keep score for games.⁴⁹ "One interpretation," writes Erickson, "would be that all is meaningless, except for the opportunity to vote. The Chinese government may make whatever lengthy pronouncement it wishes, but only

an announcement that democracy would be enacted would have any meaning.”⁵⁰ This remarkably Orientalist pronouncement declares a lack or suspension of meaning in Chinese civilization until it adopts the Western model of government.⁵¹ Elsewhere a subtler language perpetuates the same philosophy: “Once the viewer can let go of the urge to read,” writes Erickson, “the urge to act upon the work of art, then he can accept and appreciate its beauty.... The viewer who does not read Chinese is free to absorb the work’s beauty without having to confront its unintelligibility.”⁵² The statement entraps itself, urging the viewer not to act on the *Book*, then insisting on the correct way to read it. It is a re-staging of the Orientalist impulse to appropriate the formal values of the other’s culture, laying waste to context, content, intent, to assert that a Western viewer is better equipped to literally read another culture than that very Other.

The Elvehjem Museum, as the first museum in the U.S. to exhibit Xu Bing, laid the critical groundwork for how to read Xu Bing and *Book from the Sky* in the English-speaking world. The most immediately damning of its language has been scrubbed from later writings—gone is the mention of the counting character as clarion call to democracy—and more recently-published accounts are more equivocal about possible interpretations of *Book from the Sky*. But beneath a more well-polished veneer the same Orientalist desire to fix the subject of China as static and backward in contrast to a West that discovers, understands, and corrects it persists. The Blanton Museum’s website reads: “Xu is an internationally recognized artist whose work encourages viewers to go beyond their worlds and discover the unexpected.”⁵³ The Princeton Museum of Art’s website similarly indicates a schizoid confidence in its own interpretation

despite an acknowledged inability to read the work: “At first many viewers didn’t realize that the text in this work—a critique of the Maoist government’s cooption of language and manipulation of education—was unreadable.”⁵⁴

2 - “Fuck Off”

The reigning belief in the critical corpus of *Book from the Sky* is that because it mimics a Song-era book the target of its mockery is Chinese culture. The radical proposition of this paper that shouldn’t be radical—recall that the original title of the work christened it a mirror of the *world*—is that *Book from the Sky* trains its scope not just on Chinese culture but on the Western high art establishment. Its mimetic target is superficially the Song-era book, more insidiously the “good” Western museum object. *Book from the Sky* appropriates the Western vernacular of a successful high art object and is thus able to slide repeatedly from the mimetic—defined by Homi Bhabha to be “a difference that is almost nothing but not quite”—to the menacing, “a difference that is almost total but not quite.”⁵⁵

This reading of *Book from the Sky* as a mockery of a “good” Western museum object is in fact also embedded in the critical language used to describe it. In the introduction to the catalog for the Elvehjem’s *Three Installations of Xu Bing*, Russell Panczenko, the director and curator, details the reason for selecting Xu Bing: “his ideas formed an interesting unity encompassing, as they did, the three aspects of contemporary Chinese culture to which a Western audience could relate.”⁵⁶ Elsewhere, the catalog extols Xu for “attain[ing] an elusive goal of much of twentieth-century Chinese art, the goal of creating works that embrace international contemporary art while acknowledging ties to traditional Chinese art.”⁵⁷ *Book from the Sky*, the “good” high art object

from China, is “traditional”—at least in a way legible to a Western audience, just as its text is only legible as Chinese to the West. As a result, it “embrace[s] international contemporary art,” a field dictated and dominated by the West. But in taking on emblems of Chinese culture that are legible to the West but nonsensical in China, *Book from the Sky* becomes a high art lampooning of the Westerner who unknowingly tattoos random Chinese characters on his bicep.

In the foreword to the catalog, Russell Panczenko writes: “Without [Xu]... all of us would be that much poorer in our understanding of a distant and complex part of the world.”⁵⁸ Panczenko’s selection of the word “poorer” is deliciously fitting. It implies that the Elvehjem’s exhibition of Xu makes the West “richer,” recalling centuries of Western plunder, cultural or literal. It also references the increasingly capital-driven nature of museum exhibitions. Herein lies another way in which *Book from the Sky* subtly appropriates or mimics a Western vernacular. “At first glance,” writes Abe, “its formal qualities might appear familiar to viewers acquainted with conceptual installations of the late 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the United States.”⁵⁹ Indeed, though the making of the book was a laborious, meditative, and meticulous process, the installation of *Book from the Sky* is, in a word, spectacular. Consistent with Julian Stallabras’s argument that installation art rose to popularity in the 1960s to battle with television over spectacular display, *Book from the Sky* is exhibited as installation, with the *Book* exploded into banners and scrolls. Being expensive, installation art invites—even necessitates—corporate involvement. This in turn ties contemporary museums to private sponsorship in a self-propagating manner, pushing museums into ever more spectacular display.⁶⁰

The spectacularity of *Book from the Sky* is a mimetic seduction that belies its true menace. In the same way that the text of the *Book* induces an affective divide—either you can “read” the work’s illegibility, or you cannot—a rupture in the work itself renders critical text inadequate. Language appropriate for its cerebral concept and dramatic visual form takes on an absurd quality when fitted with the semantic babble of its content.⁶¹ The content of the work and its criticism conspire to create, along Bhabha’s formation, a “text rich in the traditions of *trompe-l’oeil*, irony, mimicry and repetition.”⁶² The *Book from the Sky*’s visual form enacts its own mimetic power as well. Over the clean, modernist lines of the Elvehjem building, its grey stone and marble construction and its off-white walls (fig. 27a), *Book from the Sky* drapes, lines, floods a deluge of nonsense (fig. 27b).⁶³ Plastered over walls, shrouding skylights, hanging over banisters, the work of Xu Bing re-papers the exhibition space, refigures its architecture. Indeed, in its installation form, many of the adjectives that describe *Book* might also describe the space that it covers: austere, highbrow, temple-like. But in its own failure—or refusal—to induce a universal experience, *Book from the Sky* problematizes a museum space that proclaims itself universal on the basis of neutrality.

My interpretation of Xu removes him from his typical representation as sage, austere, and cerebral, in a generation with artists paralyzed by the paradoxes of the Cultural Revolution.⁶⁴ Rather than fix *Book from the Sky* in a constructed China that is backward, static, and necessarily traditional, we project it instead into its future, placing it in conversation with the work of younger Chinese artists. Christened by that king of flipping off, Ai Weiwei, in an eponymous 2000 exhibit, the “Fuck Off” generation is characterized by work of a visceral and often crude

nature. It includes artists such as Zhang Huan, who once traipsed the streets of New York in a suit made of raw meat (fig. 28), and Xu Zhen, who burst into the art scene as a teen with a video work of him swinging a dead cat violently against the walls of a room (fig. 29)⁶⁵. “We wanted to show the 'fuck off' style,” writes the co-curator, Feng Boyi. “Not working for the government or in the style of western countries, but a third way.”⁶⁶

The “third way” often alludes to capital, with many of these artists producing in factories, or else in a self-consciously copyist mode. In a playful rethinking of the “Made in China” trope, many brand their work, such as in Ai Weiwei’s Fake Studio or Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Company and brand, XU ZHEN®. “I have a factory complex of 5,000 square meters,” Zhang Huan told an interviewer, “with more than 80 people working full time for me to produce artworks.”⁶⁷ The “fuck off” artists make mimetic works like *Book from the Sky*, but theirs are brazen to the point of caricature. Xu Zhen, master of the hyperreal, staged the blisteringly uncomfortable tableau vivant *The Starving of Sudan*, replicating a famous photograph of a malnourished Sudanese toddler stalked by a vulture, complete with a mechanized bird (fig. 30). And Cao Fei’s *RMB City*, housed entirely in the online world of Second Life, melds the familiar with the fantastic: a Ferris wheel rotating on top of the Monument to the People’s Heroes, the water of the Three Gorges reservoir gushing out of Tiananmen Rostrum (fig. 31).

The “Fuck Off” works seem to possess all the requisite conditions to enact the same mimic-menace slide as does *Book from the Sky*. As in Zhang Huan’s factory complex, contemporary Western art abounds with works produced in workshops that are all but factories.⁶⁸ As in Ai Weiwei’s Fake Studio, pieces in Western museums are often rendered by another’s

hand.⁶⁹ And like the products of XU ZHEN®, some are simply blatant copies.⁷⁰ Yet the “Fuck Off” works somehow fail to slide fully into the menacing. They seem in some ways too-blatant, veering easily into caricature or critique. They are often overtly political. *Book from the Sky*, on the other hand, resides in an ambiguous space where its mimetic target shifts, allowing it to slip just out of the grasp of the critical language that attempts to contain it, alternatively mocking both the Chinese government and the high art establishment.

Book from the Sky's approach is so subtle that its power might only become visible in contrast to another work. The closest analog of the documented “Fuck Off” generation to *Book from the Sky* is likely Zhang Huan's *Family Tree*, a series of nine frames of the artist's face, gazing straight at the camera (fig. 32). Throughout the series, characters from Chinese proverbs and literary texts are inked onto Zhang's face by three hired calligraphers. As the characters become illegible, even the camera seems to lose its grip—by the last shot, Zhang is off-center and blurry, the lens unable to parse the black dearth of information. The artist's face becomes a shiny shell resembling something like blackface, nauseating in smell, dripping onto his sweater. The only legible features are the artist's wide eyes, staring defiantly back at the viewer.

Family Tree and *Book from the Sky* are both works that slowly obfuscate emblems of traditional Chinese culture to deeply ambiguous ends. The critical difference between the two, however, is that *Family Tree* blatantly stares back. At the end of the process of semiotic obliteration, only one viscerally recognizable feature remains: the artist's own eyes. Its seriality, its obvious temporality, directs the eye. *Book from the Sky*, on the other hand, has no identifiable bodily referent except its form, which fails in function. It is not a work that stares back—

conversely, it appears to be an object that requires activation, that remains dormant until it is looked *at*. Their respective titles, too, demarcate their differences. The name “Family Tree” tethers the work to the earth, to the realm of the progenitive and mortal; the title “Book from the Sky,” on the other hand, identifies it with the heavens. It erases labor, denies its human referent, seems to imply, almost, that it emerged fully formed, like a deity.

But of course, this is but one of the many guises of *Book from the Sky*. The making of the *Book* was anything but easy, entailing four solitary years of chiseling at pear wood; the efforts of an entire factory of printers; the woodworker who cut, stained, and joined the boxes that contained it; the people who shipped, insured, and installed it. It is not “of the heavens” but acutely of the earth, produced in a process involving many hands, sold and signed by the “maker” himself as a mark of its exquisite and absurd value. Because it is unassuming, because it does not look back, because it is easily (mis)understood, it is an object that settles easily into a third space, that says—without saying anything—“fuck off.”

V. Of Mimicry and Menace

Dafen Village, a collection of art-making factories located just outside the industrial megacity of Shenzhen, is the very nightmare of Chinese factory production. By some metrics, it produces 60% of the world’s oil paintings.⁷¹ Bosses delegate to contract artists working side-by-side, assembly-line style. Crucially, most of the paintings produced by Dafen Village do not appear to be in any way Chinese. They are sold as works by “named” Italian artists, as paintings by struggling young art students, or peddled by merchants in front of the Met. The menace of

Dafen Village is the fear that a Chinese fake could be so mimetically perfect that it sails past the watchful eyes of the authenticator, appraiser, curator, and into the museum itself.

Book from the Sky is that very Chinese fake at the same time that it unsettles what it means to be “fake” in the first place. It is *not* a Song-era book, even though it was meant to “very much look” like one.⁷² And if “intention is everything”⁷³ when it comes to faking, then *Book from the Sky* is, on a primary level, a fake. Yet that fakery, subsumed into the meaning-making of the work, becomes authentic in association with the high art object. Marcel Duchamp, the art critical establishment agrees, did not make fakes. Neither does Xu Bing.

Book from the Sky, fundamentally, is a project of unsettling. It is a Chinese copy, because it was made in accordance with and respect for tradition, crafted through Xiu He’s principle of “the copying of models.” It is a Chinese copy because one hundred twenty copies were made at once, because more can and have been manufactured. It is a Chinese copy because it was Made In China, assembled in a Chinese factory like a pair of knockoff Nikes, an iPhone. And yet at the same time it is not a Chinese copy—it is an original art object, a Western museum object assembled by a Chinese artist. It is a book that is not a book, being eminently unreadable, exhibited nearly exclusively as installation. It is lovingly, intimately, handcrafted; it is self-consciously, publicly, spectacular. It is a conceptual critique of the censorship of the Chinese government; it is a linchpin of contemporary Chinese art. It could have been printed in hours with a computer. Instead, it was made over a span of four years, time-consumingly, laboriously, with a technique deemed inefficient a millennium ago. The final and first act of *Book from the Sky* is that it simply does not make sense.

That which is accordingly repressed by the museum—by its catalog and wall text, its architecture, the critical apparatus that maintains it, the capital that enables it—comes back to haunt with a force. *Book from the Sky*—encased in a walnut-wood box, six-hole stitched, cobalt blue (it is a scholarly work, a serious work)—is silent, inert, yet aggressively illegible. When installed, its posters, mimicking Chinese news posters, and its scrolls, mimicking a classical Chinese form, mock the duplicity of a Chinese government that says one thing and does another, that eradicates tradition in the name of modernity. But displayed in a museum, an institution forged in the Western tradition, its mimetic target slides. It does something stranger.

In papering over walls, negating architecture, tempering light, with row after row of nonsense, *Book from the Sky* reveals the space of the museum—white, apolitical, neutral—to be something other than such. It blurs the boundaries between authentic and fake, original and multiple, individual and collective. Multiply mimetic, it confuses the distinction between the Chinese copy and the Western original. Through *Book from the Sky*'s project of unsettling, the paranoia of Dafen Village filters in: in the next room, a photograph by Man Ray, printed by another's hand after his death, becomes stranger. Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III*—100% repainted—begins to seem alien (fig. 33). And across the Atlantic, while the London crowd admires Glenn Ligon's *Rückenfigur*, its white neon lights spelling out "America," the original sits in Brooklyn, in a storage closet, with its lights out (fig. 34). It was far more expensive, more laborious, more time-consuming, the conservators realized, to ship it across the water than to reforge the work on-site. So why do it then? It simply didn't make sense.

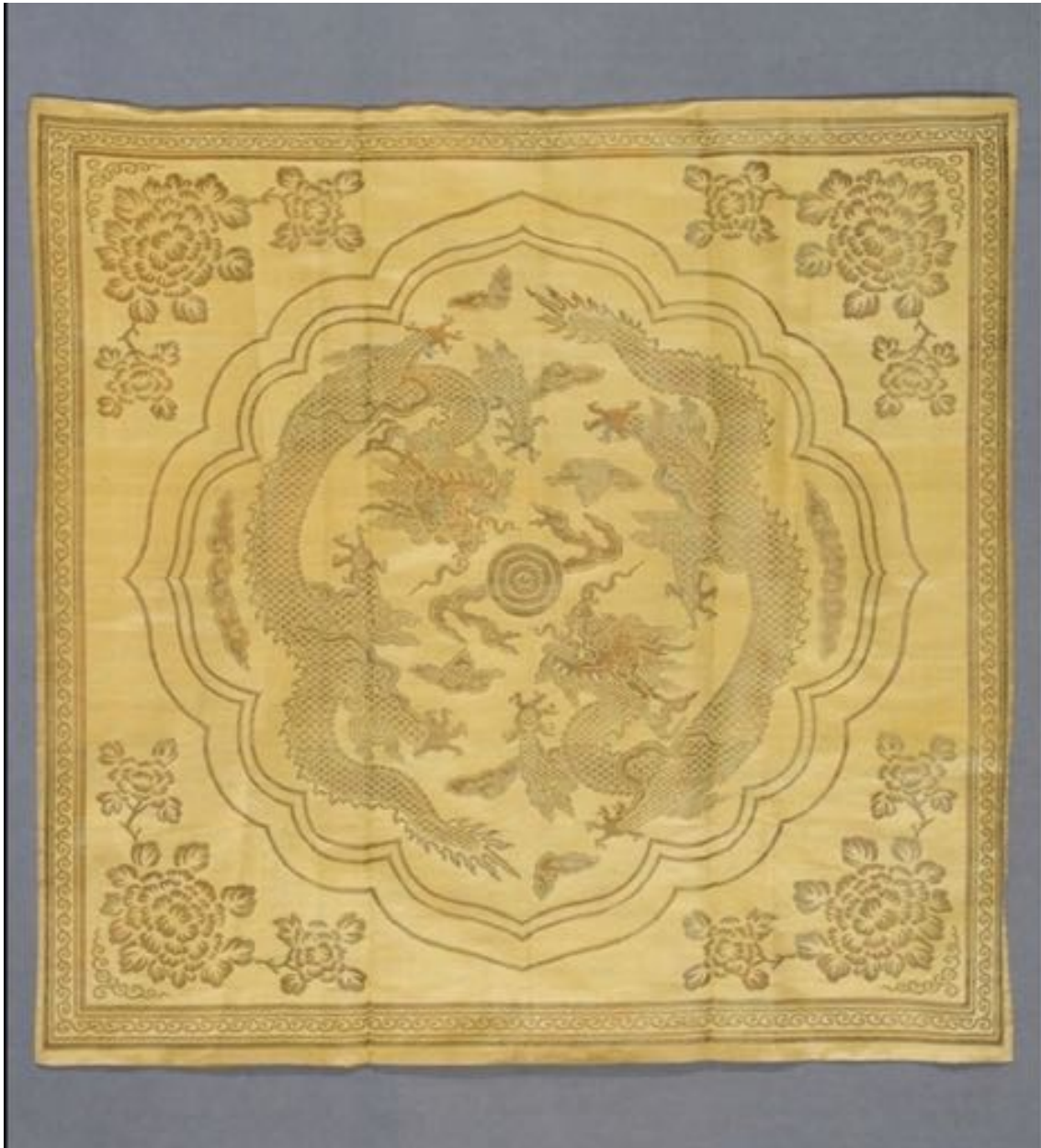
Images



1 - Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, ca. 1987-1991. Books hand-printed from wood letterpress type; ink on paper. Four books: 96 pages; 69; 61; 76 folded leaves. Each book, open: 18 1/8 × 20 in. (46 × 51 cm).



2 - Xu, Bing, *Book from the Sky*, ca. 1987-1991. Note the six-hole thread binding of the edition on the left.



3 – *Book Cover*, no date. Silk, fibre, metal, dye, 106 cm x 108.5 cm. Panel, roughly square, composed of imperial yellow silk with a metallic brocade design featuring two dragon figures at the centre, floral motifs at the corners, and a border of and a floral design lined in yellow. Lined with yellow silk. Stamped in red ink at one corner. Used for wrapping books in the imperial library. UBC Museum of Anthropology, The Bernulf and Edith Clegg Oriental Collection. https://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_32930011.



7a - Book from the Sky, Vol. 1. Note the reoccurrence of the preface character in the top right corner.



7b - *Book from the Sky*, Vol. 1. This is a zoomed in version of the two characters circled in blue in figure 6, each consisting of three boxes stacked vertically. In the three-box format, the number of the first box is multiplied by 10, the number represented by the second box, and summed with the number in the third box.

In the first three-box character, for example, the first box contains one full five-stroke “𠄎,” so it equates to 5. The second box has two full “𠄎” characters, meaning 10. The last has yet another fully-formed “𠄎,” or 5. The full summation of the left character would thus be $5 \times 10 + 5 = 55$.

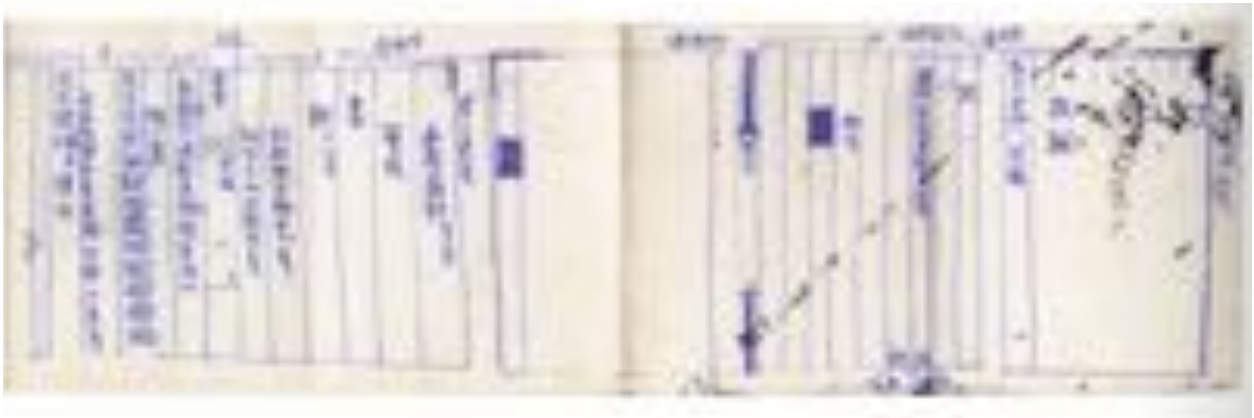
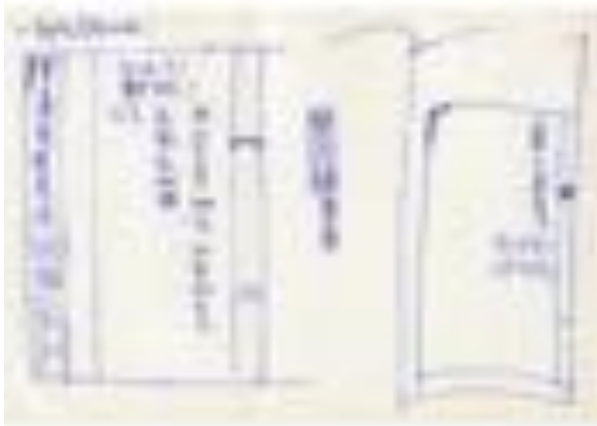
In the second three-box character, the first “𠄎” has three strokes of the five-stroke “𠄎,” or “3,” the second two full 𠄎 characters, or “10,” the third one full 𠄎 and one two-stroke 𠄎, or “7.” The full character is thus $3 \times 10 + 7$, or 37.



8 - Xu making the characters of *Book from the Sky* in his dorm room at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, circa 1987. Here we see him working out potential characters. Piled in front of him are a number of wood blocks inked with what seem to be successfully chosen nonsense characters.



9 - An audience looking closely at *Book from the Sky*, exhibited as part of the “China/ Avant-Garde” show at the China Art Gallery, Beijing, 1989.



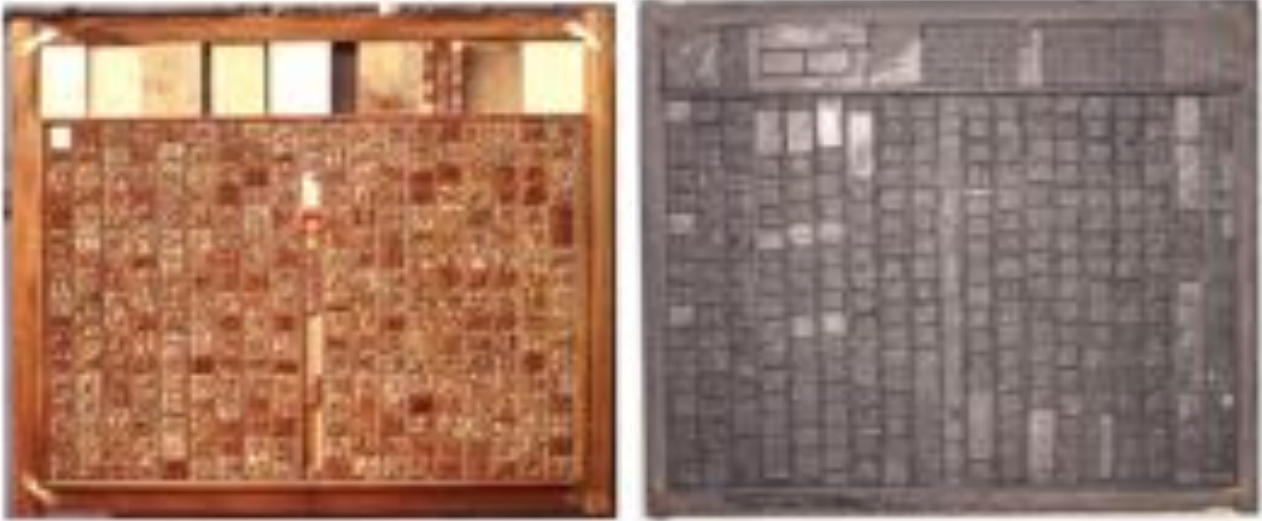
10 - Xu Bing, Book layout studies for *Book from the Sky*, circa 1987, ink on paper. Excerpts.



11 - A comparison of the *Kaiti* and the *Songti*. (Source: <https://jiromaiya.wordpress.com/2013/01/04/fundamentals-of-chinese-typography-1-fonts-styles-typefaces-songti-fangsongti-mingti-heiti-kaiti/>)



12 - Leaf from *Book from the Sky* (left) and *Collected poems by Su Shi, commented on by Ji Yun* (right). The latter was a Song-era book printed during the Qing dynasty in 1869 with red commentary. Note many of the same features as in Xu's work, such as the eyebrow notes, the systems of indentation, and the presence of the fishtail (the triangle shaped mark on the right-most margin of each book). Note that *Book from the Sky* has fewer columns, denser and squatter text, and a larger printed area per leaf.



13 - Two chases for *Book from the Sky*, one prior to inking, the other after. Note that the wooden blocks can be slipped out of the chase and rearranged.



14 - The *Bagua*, or Eight Trigrams, from the *Yi Jing*, or *Book of Changes*. From the topmost character, in a counterclockwise progression: *dian*, the heavens; *dui*, lake/ marsh; *li*, fire; *lei*, thunder; *feng*, wind; *kan*, water; *gen*, mountain; *kun*, ground.



15 - From top, clockwise: Unknown artist(s) from the Song dynasty, *The Classic of Filial Piety*; Li Gonglin, *The Classic of Filial Piety*, ca. 1085; Unknown artist, *Illustrations of the Ladies' Classic of Filial Piety*, from the Song dynasty.



16 - Xu Bing working on *Book from the Sky* at Caiyuxiang Ancient Books Printing Factory, Daxing District, Beijing, 1988. The two plates in the foreground are for *The Buddhist Canon (Dazangjing)* being printed at the factory.



17 - *Terracotta Army*, Qin Dynasty (259BCE - 210BCE). Terracotta, dimensions variable. Lintong District, Shaanxi, China. Despite their individual faces, note the features that have been standardized through modular production, such as the shape of their bodies, armor, and hands.



18 - Cartouche from *Book from the Sky*. Note the handwritten signature in the open book on the page facing the text.



19 - *Illuminated manuscript, recto (l) verso (r)*. ca. 1440-1450. 5 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. Lawrence University Wriston Art Center Galleries Collections



20 - *Winter Landscape with Birdtrap*, circa 1565. Clockwise from top: Version owned by Archduke Leopold of Austria, Kunsthistorisches Museum; Version owned by Christian IV of Denmark; Version owned by Elizabeth Farnese; Version sold by Sotheby's London in July 2014 for £3.4 million.



21 - Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, 1990, mixed media installation, variable size. Installation at the Elvehjem Museum.



22 - Xu Bing, *Five Series of Repetition*, ca. 1986-1987. Woodblock print, Installation at the Elvehjem Museum, 1991. Installation and detail.



24 - *Book from the Sky*, installation view at the Elvehjem Museum, 1991. Note *Five Series of Repetition* in the background.



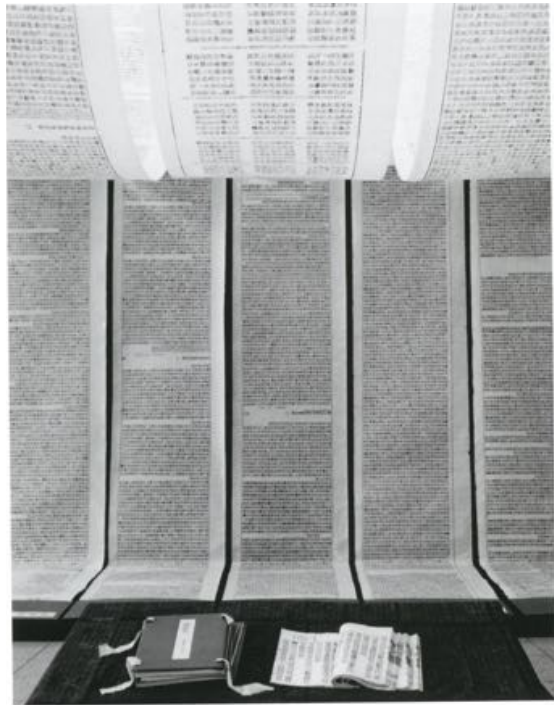
25 - Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, Installed at the Elvehjem Museum, 1991.



26 - Construction of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*. Left: making ink rubbings on the Great Wall, Jinshanling, China. Right: Assembling the rubbings, Madison, USA.



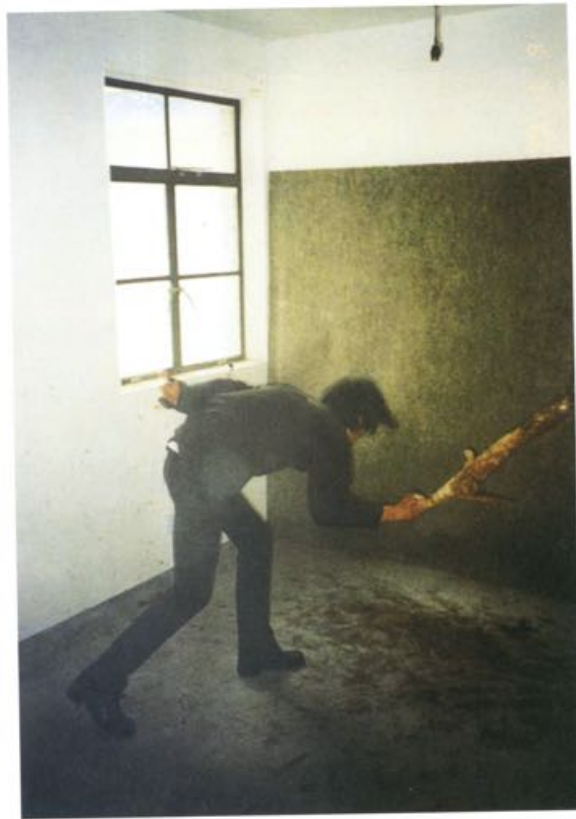
27a - The Elvehjem Museum.



27b - *Book from the Sky*, various installations. Top: *China/Avant-Garde*, China Art Gallery, Beijing, 1989. Bottom left: *Xu Bing*, Tokyo Art Gallery, Tokyo, 1991. Right: *Cocido y Crudo*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 1994.



28 - Zhang Huan, *My New York*, Still from a performance, Whitney Museum, New York, 2002.



29 - Xu Zhen, *I'm Not Asking for Anything*, 1997. Performance, video, 53:36 min.



30 - Top: Kevin Carter, *The Vulture and the Little Girl*, 1993. Bottom: Xu Zhen, *The Starving of Sudan*, 2008.



31 - Cao Fei, *RMB City: A Second Life Planning by China Tracy* (aka: *Cao Fei*), 2007, Color video, with sound, 6 min. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds contributed by the Young Collectors Council with additional funds contributed by Shanghai Tang, 2008



32 - Zhang Huan, *Family Tree*, 2001, 9 chromogenic prints; polyptych, Réunion des Musées Nationaux (RMN).



33 - Barnett Newman, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III*, 1967-1968. In 1986, the work was vandalized, slashed with a knife. In 1991, it was restored by Daniel Goldreyer to extreme controversy. Critics proclaimed that subtle nuances in the color had been lost through Goldreyer's use of house paints and a roller. Goldreyer in turn filed a \$125 million defamation suit against the city of Amsterdam.



34 - Glenn Ligon, *Rückenfigur*, 2009. Neon and paint, 24 x 145 1/2 x 5 in. (61 x 396 x 12.7cm). Whitney Museum of Art.

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-251.

³ Samuel Gibbs, "Huawei beats Apple to become second-largest smartphone maker," *The Guardian*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/01/huawei-beats-apple-smartphone-manufacturer-samsung-iphone>.

⁴ Winnie Won Yin Wong, *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁵ Xu Bing and Drew Hammond, "The Making of Book from the Sky," in *Tianshu: Passages in the Making of a Book*, ed. Katherine Spears, (London: Quatrich, 2009), 55.

⁶ Wu Hung, "A 'Ghost Rebellion': Notes on Xu Bing's 'Nonsense Writing' and Other Works," in *Tianshu: Passages in the Making of a Book*, ed. Katherine Spears (London: Quatrich, 2009), 87-98.

⁷ Xu and Hammond, 51.

⁸ Xu and Hammond, 52.

⁹ Xu and Hammond, 53.

¹⁰ Xu and Hammond, 52.

¹¹ Xu and Hammond, 62.

¹² Xu and Hammond, 54.

¹³ Propaganda proliferated at this time. Slogans were printed onto ordinary items, and political sayings by Mao were posted everywhere by the government and expected to be promoted by the masses. This is consistent with the installation form of *Book from the Sky*, in which banners and scrolls cover the exhibition space. This work will be discussed later.

¹⁴ Xu and Hammond, 52.

¹⁵ Xu and Hammond, 52.

¹⁶ Xu and Hammond, 53.

¹⁷ Xu and Hammond, 51.

¹⁸ Stanley Abe, "No Questions, No Answers: China and A Book from the Sky" (*Boundary 2 - An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 25, no. 3, 1998), 178.

¹⁹ The boundaries of a culture are, of course, diffuse—one of the main arguments of this thesis is that *Book from the Sky* confuses the clear boundaries between, among other things, "East" and "West." This reductive framework, however, needs to be first articulated in order to be later disproven.

²⁰ Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

²¹ Ledderose, 75.

²² The Qing Dynasty lasted from 1644CE - 1911CE.

²³ Jason Steuber, “Qing Dynasty Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong: Rule through Replication in Architecture and the Arts,” in *Original Intentions : Essays on Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation in the Arts of China* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 140.

²⁴ Ledderose, 5.

²⁵ Shane McCausland, “Copy and Transmitting, Knowledge and Nonsense: From the Great Encyclopaedia to A Book from the Sky,” in *Original Intentions : Essays on Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation in the Arts of China* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 239.

²⁶ McCausland, 239.

²⁷ Ledderose, 5.

²⁸ Nick Pearce, “Introduction,” in *Original Intentions : Essays on Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation in the Arts of China* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 1.

²⁹ Xu Bing and Britta Erickson, *Three Installations by Xu Bing : November 30, 1991-January 19, 1992* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1992), 15.

³⁰ Julian Stallabras, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

³¹ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulation” in *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1988. We choose this word over the many synonyms of “copy”—replica, mimesis, reproduction—because of the particular aptness of Baudrillard’s use (1) meaning a copy that now lacks an original, and (2) in association with late capitalism.

³² For further discussion, see Julian Stallabras’s *Art Incorporated*, in particular the chapter, “A zone of freedom?”

³³ Abe, 187.

³⁴ Françoise Benhamou, and Victor Ginsburgh, "Is There a Market for Copies?" *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 32, no. 1 (2002), 39.

³⁵ Benhamou and Ginsburgh, 40.

³⁶ Benhamou and Ginsburgh, 40.

³⁷ Benhamou and Ginsburgh, 40.

³⁸ Benhamou and Ginsburgh, 41.

³⁹ One of which, interestingly, was the ritual of sitting down to eat meals at a dining hall table.

⁴⁰ Dorothy Moss, "Translations, Appropriations, and Copies of Paintings at the Dawn of Mass Culture in the United States, circa 1900" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2012), 4.

⁴¹ See Moss, pages 5-8, for discussion of photographs in early museums; 16, for discussion of plaster casts as teaching tools; 28, for discussion of the status of the painted copy in the museum.

⁴² Moss, 31. Additionally, Edwin Godkin, a founder of *the Nation* and an early influential American figure, launched a crusade against chromolithography, linking in the American consciousness the idea of the poor copy to the idea of a degraded American culture.

⁴³ Stallabras, 10-11.

⁴⁴ Hal Brands, "America's Cold Warriors Hold the Key to Handling China," *Bloomberg*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-01-14/china-and-the-u-s-are-in-a-new-cold-war>.

⁴⁵ Wisconsin University, 15.

⁴⁶ Joyce Lau, "An Artist Who Bridges East and West," *New York Times*, May 19, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/arts/20iht-Xu20.html>.

⁴⁷ Jamil Anderlini, "Apolitically Engaged," *Financial Times*, April 29, 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/d3fe59ca-711f-11e0-acf5-00144feabdc0>

⁴⁸ Though this is a loaded Orientalist word, it has been recently reclaimed in Asian-American studies. See Vivian L. Huang's "Inscrutably, Actually: Hospitality, Parasitism, and the Silent Work of Yoko Ono and Laurel Nakadate."

⁴⁹ I can personally attest to this.

⁵⁰ Wisconsin University, 12.

⁵¹ Said, 240. Britta Erickson adds on page 12 of the Elvehjem Museum catalog, "Xu denies that this is his intended meaning, but admits that it is a possible interpretation."

⁵² Wisconsin University, 12.

⁵³ "Xu Bing: Book from the Sky," Blanton Museum, <https://blantonmuseum.org/exhibition/xu-bing-book-from-the-sky/>.

⁵⁴ "Book from the Sky (Tianshu 天書), ca. 1987–91," Princeton University Art Museum, <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/41315>.

⁵⁵ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 91.

⁵⁶ Wisconsin University, 1. The full quote reads: “I met with Xu Bing and reviewed examples of his custom-designed Chinese calligraphy and photographs of his students precariously perched on bamboo scaffolding doing rubbings of the Great Wall of China. We discussed his ideas on the intellectual parallels between questions of population and the reductive printmaking process. His ideas formed an interesting unity encompassing, as they did, the three aspects of contemporary Chinese culture to which a western audience could relate.” In this richly essentialist sentence, Panczenko declares the belief not only that there are only three relatable aspects of Chinese culture but also that they could be so easily named and pinpointed. It is less clear from his actual writing what those three aspects are.

⁵⁷ Wisconsin University, 2.

⁵⁸ University of Wisconsin, 1.

⁵⁹ Abe, 176.

⁶⁰ Stallabras, 26-27.

⁶¹ Bhabha, 86. In his own example, Bhabha discusses how the “normalizing” mission of the colonial state splits in the use of the word “slave” in John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*. The word is used first in a simply descriptive sense as a legitimate form of ownership, secondly as a “trope for an intolerable, illegitimate exercise of power.” Note that there is a certain loss of information in the transposing of Bhabha’s literary theory onto a work of art, but perhaps it is fitting, given the quasi-textual nature of *Book from the Sky*.

⁶² Bhabha, 85.

⁶³ Catherine Brawer, “College Museum Notes,” *Art Journal* 30, no. 1 (1970), 55.

⁶⁴ In particular artists like Gu Wenda, Qiu Zhijie, Qin Feng.

⁶⁵ It is a point of contention whether or not the cat was dead when he found it.

⁶⁶ Pollack, Barbara. *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic’s Adventures in China*. (Hong Kong: Timezone 8), 2010. This reference to the “third way” does not appear to allude to Homi Bhabha’s idea of a “third space,” or at least Feng Boyi did not mention Bhabha to Barbara Pollack. Whether or not it is an intentional reference, it has undeniable resonances.

⁶⁷ Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art outside China* (Milano: Charta, 2006,) 7.

⁶⁸ Jeff Koons, Andy Warhol, and Theaster Gates being examples that spring immediately to mind.

⁶⁹ In the form not just of workshops (recall El Greco) but in conservation as well. For an excellent article on the subject, see Ben Lerner’s “The Custodians,” *New Yorker*, January 3, 2016.

⁷⁰ Benhamou and Ginsburgh, 38. The Rodin Museum is authorized to produce up to eight copies of plaster left by Rodin upon his death. The Museum then sells these pieces as genuine Rodins. The same goes for works by Jean Arp reproduced by the Fondation Arp.

⁷¹ Francis Arnold, “The World’s Art Factory is in Jeopardy,” Artsy, June 22, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-village-60-worlds-paintings-future-jeopardy>.

⁷² Xu and Hammond, 51.

⁷³ Pearce, 1.

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