

Ensaïos

A reading of the unreadable book: *Xu Bing's Book from the Sky*

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Abstract

Xu Bing's installation *Book from the Sky* (天书 *Tianshu*) has been the subject of many different interpretations. What does this imposing artwork seek to convey, when its hundreds of books, posters, and scrolls, are full of four thousand invented "characters" that have no literal meaning and cannot even be read? I begin by describing the installation and then proceed to situate it in the time of its inception, China in the 1980s, as it was a product of that decade. Next, I present my interpretation of this artwork, which emphasizes, not sociopolitical aspects, nor influences by Western thinkers or

theoretical currents, but its connexion to Chinese culture. Crossing Zen with the specificities of the Chinese script allows me to argue that *Tianshu* is ultimately about the Chinese script and points towards the visual dimensions of Chinese traditional thought.

Keywords

Book from the Sky • Xu Bing • Zen • Chinese contemporary art • Chinese culture

Introduction

From a menacing “avant-garde” artwork in China in the late 1980s to “dissident” art in the US in the 1990s, *Tianshu* 天书 (*Book/Script from the Sky* or *Non-sense script/book*), an installation produced between 1987 and 1991 by the Chinese contemporary artist Xu Bing 徐冰 (Chongqing, 1955-), is now considered his *magnum opus* and has become an integral part of the transnational artistic scene.

This immersive installation occupies an entire room and consists of more than four hundred books bound in the traditional Chinese way and opened on the ground. Paper posters hang on the surrounding walls, and very long scrolls hang on the ceiling (Figure 1). Books, posters, and scrolls are crowded with what seem to be Chinese characters printed in movable types. But these “characters” do not exist in the Chinese writing system. They are about four thousand inventions by the artist. Although based on the structural morphology of real characters and their elements being recognizable, they have no lexical meaning and cannot even be read, since the particular arrangement of those elements does not exist in the Chinese writing system. The lexical meaning was removed, as was the sound associated with the character, because the Chinese script does not function phonetically as an alphabetic script.

It can be said that the “characters” of *Tianshu* are only partially invented. It is so because Xu Bing started by deconstructing the real characters in their elements. His “characters” were based on the 214 determinatives, 部首 *bushou*, of the Kangxi Dictionary 康熙字典 *Kangxi zidian*, (1710-1716) and on the complex or non-simplified characters, 繁体字 *fantizi*, not on the simplified characters, 简体字 *jiantizi*, adopted in the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s. He decomposed them, and then, he recomposed them, juxtaposing new combinations of elements to a previously isolated determinative. He did so by preserving only the number of elements necessary for the “character”



Figure 1. *Book From the Sky*, installation by Xu Bing. Hong Kong Museum of Art exhibition in October 2020. © Photo by Meikowkmeomi Othumddroa

to be very similar to the existing characters and respect their square shape and balanced appearance. However, they cannot be read.

Each volume, measuring approximately 45 × 30 cm, with a total of 604 pages, was printed on folded sheets of *cangjing zhi* 藏经纸, the paper used for writing or printing Buddhist scriptures, and follows the structure of the great Chinese classics, with prefaces, 绪 *xu*; index, 目录 *mulu*; main text, 正文 *zhengwen*; comments, 加诸 *jiazhu*, and marginal notes, 眉批 *meipi*. On the last page there is the traditional colophon (版 *ban*) in a rectangular box (Figure 2).

The graphic font used for the characters is called 宋体 *songti*. *Songti* is the font chosen for printing most books, magazines, newspapers, and official documents in China. Xu Bing himself explained his preference for the *songti* graphic font: “Why



Figure 2. The books of *Book from the Sky*, installation by Xu Bing. Hong Kong Museum of Art exhibition in October 2020. © Photo by Meikow-kmeomi Othumddroa

did I choose the *songti* font? Because it is the most common font and has the least character and style.” (Xu, Yin and Feng, 2005) By choosing this classic font, Xu Bing wanted to create the impression that those books and scrolls conveyed important, “official” information, and that careful reading was needed. He thus magnified the surprising effect when viewers found out that the characters were “fake” and the texts were unreadable.

Reading the Unreadable Book

When *Tianshu* was first exhibited in the US in 1991, the 1989 events in Tiananmen were still recent. Therefore, it was then subjected to a series of politically charged readings, which were instrumental for its acceptance in that country. The careful design and construction of the installation were often neglected, as well as the nature of the mounting of the “characters.” The installation was seen as ‘non-sense’, “anti-writing and anti-Chinese culture”, a demand for “freedom and democracy”, and a statement against the propaganda of the Cultural Revolution (Figure 3). This was the case of the seminal article by American curator Britta Erickson (1991),

one of the most quoted to this day. *Tianshu* is seen there as a negative, pessimistic and frustrating work, a critique of Chinese culture and political regime and an “audaciously subversive political statement, implying that all pronouncements of the Chinese government, except for the unforthcoming call for a changeover to democracy, are totally devoid of meaning.” (Erickson, 1991, p. 2) And for Iezzi, *Tianshu* represents “a powerful negation of Chinese history, culture, literature, and language” (2013, p. 162). Another example of a recent and highly politicized reading is Laureillard (2017, p.143), who sees in *Tianshu* an “evident” rejection of the Maoist period and the sacred character of writing.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, readings of *Tianshu* shifted towards sociological idioms that deal with memory, cultural identity, and the dilemma between traditional and modern.

Yang situated *Tianshu* in the debate that took place in the 1980s about the possibility of the permanence of Chinese culture, and *Tianshu* “highlights the fate of a moribund culture” (1998, p. 26) by emphasizing the struggle for national and cultural reconstruction, showing the outcome is far from simple.

For Yao, the work contests, not Chinese literary culture *per se*, but the manipulation of literary culture by political powers that turn it into an “obscene object of economic and ideological instrumentality” (1997, p. 199), as when Singapore in the 1990s took advantage of Confucian thought to promote the so-called “Asian values”.

Chattopadhyay (2005) believes *Tianshu* exposes language as an arbitrary and socially constructed system, because it forces viewers to extract meaning visually, not verbally. The verbal dimension is surpassed by the visual one, therefore overcoming the hegemonic nature of culture, calligraphy and language. For Ch’ien (2007), *Tianshu* even negates language, since it deprives it of any usefulness for a community. Xu Bing shows that it is not mandatory to invest signs with cultural authority, and that it is necessary to resist their symbolic power.



Figure 3. Big characters posters (*dazibao*) in Beijing University, 1967. Public domain

Tsao (2011) advocates that *Tianshu* reveals that language without its communicative function is a social paradox; and that when traditional culture is reduced to visual references devoid of historical context there is no traceability to meaning. Lee shares a similar view, considering *Tianshu* a “pessimistic” work that “delivers a visual performance in noncommunication” (2015, p. 450).

The work continued to be subjected to a Euro/American-centric view, the Chinese worldview and Chinese thinking being constantly neglected, even when reviewers were of Chinese descent, or from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Some reviewers appeal to Western philosophical theories, quoting the likes of Wittgenstein, Saussure, Derrida, or Foucault.

Shin reads *Tianshu* (2006) in the light of Wittgenstein’s understanding of ordinary language as being “vague” in meaning, as well as a “game”, in the sense that it functions within the framework of its speakers’ everyday life. *Tianshu* manipulates the viewer’s thinking, so that he or she quickly concludes that those are characters, texts, books, posters, and that they can be read. However, he or she soon discovers that they were wrong. But since the desire for clarification remains, meaning emerges when the viewer begins to establish correlations between what he or she sees and his or her world.

It is for this reason that the meaning of the work varies according to the type of viewer, in terms of nationality, age, gender, etc.

Klawitter resorts to Foucault’s ontology of language and Derrida’s grammatical critique of Western phonocentrism. From a semiotic point of view, what makes *Tianshu*’s “characters” interesting is that they “explore the boundary between signification and non-significant” (2012, p. 92). They lead viewers into a non-signifying void but also invite them to interpret it, sabotaging themselves in the process. *Tianshu* thus acts as a stimulus for questioning: what makes a set of features a character? And what are signifiers that have lost their significance? What role do they play in the signal world of contemporary language?

Liao (2016) appeals to the notion of “ancestrality”¹ of contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux. He identifies *Tianshu* as a phenomenon of “ancestrality” because it goes back to a previous time of primitive signifying elements, to the genesis of meaning. Xu Bing implied a mathematical description of the writing system, thus revealing its structure: the distribution of strokes in the “characters” and their combinations. Liao then concludes that, despite being impoverished in meaning, *Tianshu* simulates partial communication between a world and its predecessor and allows us to imagine new possibilities for the rejuvenation of the world.

Jaworski (2018), notes that the debate around *Tianshu* has been framed under the ideology of national language developed by German philosopher von Herder (1744-1803), according to which the heart and soul of a people reside in language. With

¹ According to Meillassoux, ancestrality refers to the reality prior to any form of life on Earth and, therefore, prior to humans and their thought. However, science can think about that time when human thought did not yet exist. It is so because science deals with primary qualities, those that are mathematizable, i.e., the qualities that a thing exhibits independently of its relations to humans.

Tianshu, Xu Bing subverts this ideology, since he separates calligraphy from literacy: the characters have neither fixed meaning nor sound, and their familiarity is deceptive.

Curators such as Pi Li, however, warn of the need to reject interpretations of contemporary Chinese art that resort to Western idioms and value judgments, otherwise Chinese art will become subservient to Western taste and fall into a false existence (quoted in Lee, 2007, p. 6).

Interpretations of *Tianshu* have finally evolved over the past twenty years to trace its deep connections with Chinese culture, Chinese script and spiritual traditions. Nakatani (2009) disagrees with the prevailing readings of *Tianshu* as sterile, seeing it instead as so procreative that an entire world is devoured by writing. Xu Bing was “possessed” by what he calls the Chinese “graphic regime,” according to which the world was conceived as a “cosmography”.

In 2011, a compilation of seven essays by philosophers and art historians was published and finally most of them established links between Xu Bing's work and Chinese language and thought or specifically Chinese historical experiences.

In a stimulating article, Ames (2011) points out that Westerners favour the conception of creation as *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing), while the Chinese prefer *creatio in situ* (creation in a situation). This is always co-creation between humans, Heaven, and Earth. In *creatio in situ*, as when one interrogates the *Yi Jing* (*Book of Changes*) there is no observation, but participation, which allows humans to become, not decipherers of meaning, but sources of meaning, especially through productive associations. From this point of view, *Tianshu* is an invitation to the creation of meaning.

Chen explores the relationship between the “philosophical-religious dimensions” of *Tianshu* (Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist) with seriousness and playfulness, given that it is a kind of laborious visual pun that deceives the reader by leading him or her into the false belief that he/she will be able

to read it. By confronting “its audience with their responsibility to make its contents meaningful” (2011, p. 84), *Tianshu* points to the participatory nature of creativity. The endless openness in reading the work stems from the Chinese philosophical-religious sensibility, which is deeply anchored in *wuwei*, non-interfering action; *buyan*, the abandonment of speech; and *dunwu*, “sudden awakening”.

Liu (2011) concludes that the artist used Zen teachings in such a way that access to tradition is achieved through the denial of its fixed identity and meaning; that is, Xu Bing used tradition in a non-traditional way in order to have access to a global audience. Like Chen, Liu refers Zen experiences of “sudden awakening” and the importance of the notion of *shengyu*, “living word,” linguistic strategies through which all duality is overcome, adopted by masters since Tang Dynasty. *Tianshu* therefore reveals “the inseparable nature of content and form, of message and mode of delivery” (2011, p. 124).

Litt (2009) points out that the “mistrust of language” in *Tianshu* is rooted, not so much in Western theories of phenomenology or deconstruction of language, but rather in what she calls Chinese “religious beliefs,” such as Zen. Xu Bing's work is inspired by Zen because it aims at interrupting rational thought and encourages a “sudden awakening.” For Gao Minglu (2003), the hard work and distrust of words also come from Zen, specifically the Northern Zen School of “gradual enlightenment”. Enlightenment is achieved through spiritual exercises and repetitive tasks. The discussion of *Tianshu* should therefore focus not on its lack of meaning or its political aspects but on the significance of its methodology and its aesthetics.

According to Banka (2016), the key to understanding *Tianshu* lies in Taoism. *Tianshu* accepts all possibilities when it rejects a fixed meaning. The adoption of a depersonalized, printed “script”, follows the same line: anyone can be considered an author. This openness to possibility characterizes the Dao. As Banka, Ely (2009) believes *Tianshu* is

at the epicentre of the Taoist view of reality which deals with continuity and change and believes that everything is transmuted into its opposite, Yin and Yang. *Tianshu* constitutes “an inscrutable vision of wisdom” (2009, p. 203) because it achieves a silence analogous to the “wordless teaching” of Taoism and, later, of Zen Buddhism.

As do these recent interpretations, mine underlines the prevalence of traditional Chinese thought in *Tianshu*. I believe *Tianshu* was more the outcome of its own time than the outcome of the Cultural Revolution and its “absurd propaganda”, as most Western scholars insist. As we shall see, Xu Bing himself has made statements in this regard.

The '85 New Wave Movement

Fascination with Western art, philosophy, sociology, and literature was at its peak among intellectuals, artists, and art critics from China in the middle 1980s. The great novelty was the translation of works from the West on humanities and social sciences. Between 1978 and 1987, more than five thousand books on Western philosophy, history and sociology were translated into Chinese, more than ten times the number of the previous thirty years (Fei, 2008: 11). Among the most influential Western authors were the names of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Kafka, T S Eliot, Sartre, Camus, Einstein, Heidegger, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Popper, Marcuse, Borges, and Hesse. Works on European and American art, and Western studies on Chinese history and culture, the May Fourth Movement, early 20th century Chinese modernism, Zen Buddhism (禅 *chan* in Chinese) and Daoism were also published (Cacchione, 2014, p. 6).

A culture fever, 文化热 *wenbua re*, swept the country and “a zeal for reading was formed” (Li, 2008, p. 26). This intellectual, artistic, and philosophical movement of enormous scope that reached its peak in 1985 is known as the '85 New Wave Movement, 八五美术新潮 *bawu meishu xinchao*. The New Wave '85,

however, was not a cohesive and uniform movement. One of its multiple trends cherished an interest in Zen and in traditional Chinese thought and art. A considerable number of artists and writers insisted on permeating their works with a Zen atmosphere or the teachings of the Dao school; others reverted to calligraphy or to traditional painting with brush and ink (Li, 1994, p. 18).

With the advent of the avant-garde calligraphic movement, artists experimented with the content and form of the Chinese characters, exploring their status both as a script and a form of art. There were two main artistic trends. One trend focused on calligraphy as a performance, bringing it closer to abstract painting. The other trend was “conceptual”, 观念 *guannian*. There were two conceptual trends: on the one hand, the Chan-Dada one, practiced mainly by the Xiamen Dada group led by Huang Yongping 黄永砫 (1954-); and, on the other hand, one focused on the art of writing, adopted by Xu Bing, Gu Wenda 谷文达 (1955-) and Wu Shanzhuan 吴山专 (1960-). Some of these artists, such as Xu Bing and Gu Wenda, had been “workers of the art of writing”, 文艺工作者 *wenyi gongzuozhe*, during the Cultural Revolution period, handwriting big-characters posters (大字报 *dazibao*) and propaganda paintings (Figure 4).

To highlight their visual power, these artists deliberately mistyped characters or arranged them randomly, or otherwise invented new “characters”, thus refusing any conventional literal meaning. As characters were stripped off their function as a form of communication, language was used mainly as a visual medium. Visualization and interpretation prevailed over linguistic meaning.

As Gao Minglu observes, “This attempt at balance between the visual and the conceptual was characteristic of all the *guannian* artworks, and it had its roots in traditional Chinese aesthetic theory” (Gao, 2011, p. 201). Therefore, it seems to me that the term “anti-writing”, often used for these artists, can only be accepted in the sense of transforming a script from a readable text into a set of



Figure 4. Beijing Normal University. Workers of the art of writing making big-character posters (*dazibao*) criticizing Liu Shaoqi, 1967. Public domain

signifiers with aesthetic (or other) value. It was not, however, a movement against Chinese tradition. Contrariwise, they were artists known for their familiarity and deep involvement with traditional arts and aesthetics and interested in defending the specificity of Chinese culture. Hence, according to Wu Hung, “this group of artists is best known for its familiarity with traditional arts and aesthetics; their experimentation with nonsense calligraphy thus appears as a rebellion within traditional Chinese art” (Wu, 1999, p. 39).

But even the word “rebellion” strikes me as excessive. The terms “expansion” or “renewal” would be more appropriate, as these artists’ experimentation took place within traditional Chinese art and were “an effective present-day way to uphold or reveal basic and enduring principles within Chinese culture, philosophy, and aesthetics.” (Brubaker & Wang, 2015, p. 53-54). Their experimentation consisted, above all, in opening new horizons for traditional Chinese art, and in expanding the old resources, thus signalling the passage to another level.

Therefore, the many existing interpretations of *Tianshu* as a work of anti-writing in the sense that it seeks to shatter the Chinese writing system from within, or that it is a critique of Chinese culture in general, are not fully justified. The deconstructed characters are Chinese, the printing method is Chi-

nese, the binding and layout of the books is Chinese. In fact, everything is Chinese in *Tianshu*, except the art of installation and even this, according to Ely (2009), may have a remote origin in China. The theme of repetition itself does not stem from Andy Warhol, but from the repetition characteristic of printing and the Chinese *modus operandi*.

Andy Warhol’s works frequently featured repeated images based on photographs of celebrities, flowers, soup cans etc., which were created through silk-screening, traditionally a commercial printing method. Repetition was thus part of the image’s meaning. Warhol used to leave untouched the imperfections that aroused in the silkscreen process, like misalignments, uneven inking, and blurred lines. They underscored the dichotomy mechanical reproduction/handmade. By blurring the lines between high art and mass-produced commercialism, the process became a form of cultural critique.

Warhol seems to have been responsible for calling Xu Bing’s attention to the theme of repetition through a black and white reproduction of one of his artworks in an Art magazine: three silk screen-prints, each depicting the same image of Jackie Kennedy. In Xu Bing’s own words: “I don’t think I would say he directly influenced my work, but I was struck by the repetition, and I then wrote a paper on the study of repetition. Seeing his work influenced me to explore the subject of repetition, and to intellectualize it.” (Dickie, 2014). But it was the repetition inherent to printing, as well as the repetition present in Chinese traditional art that actually influenced his work back in those days:

As a result of my study of printmaking, I became fascinated with the concept of repetition. This was the subject of my master’s thesis, and I also did a series of works based on the concept of repetition, which became the precursor to *Book from the Sky*. In fact, the visual impact of *Book from the Sky* is very much related to the repetitive quality of the printing process. (Quoted in Harper, 2003)

The theme of repetition can also often be seen in Chinese artistic representations. When he was a student and later a teacher at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, Xu Bing travelled extensively through China to study and copy ancient works of art. In 1983 and 1985, he travelled to Dunhuang, Gansu province, where he visited the world-renowned “Thousand-Buddha Caves”, or Mogao Caves. As early as the fifth century C.E., the Thousand-Buddha motif, a multitude of similar Buddhas, is a recurrent theme in the art of many cave-temples in Gansu. Since then, the repetition of myriads of Buddhas and bodhisattvas prevailed under many art forms. During his trips, Xu Bing felt reassured in his belief that the aesthetics of repetition is legitimate in art:

It is without a doubt that there is aesthetic value in the artistic phenomenon of repetition. An entire edifice of the Mogao Caves, lined with an infinite number of near-identical niches, architecturally amplifies in replicated form a single version of a Han Dynasty image. (Xu, 1987)

The Chinese predilection for reproduction and variation within repetition, as much as for profusion, stems from their different way of conceiving creativity and the adoption of nature as the main model:

Rather than making things that *looked* like creations of nature, they [Chinese artists] tried to create along the *principles* of nature. These principles included prodigious creation of large numbers of organisms. Variations, mutations, change here and there add up over time, eventually resulting in entirely new shapes. (Ledderose, 1998, p. 7)

Celestial rhythms work by deconstruction and reconstruction that open space for new possibilities, and this is precisely what happens in *Tianshu*. Xu Bing deconstructed Chinese characters but preserved their strokes and modules to create new

configurations. He took away the readability of classical books but copied their design. In short, he kept the matrix and made variations from it.

Therefore, to see *Tianshu* as being anti-Chinese culture or anti-Chinese is highly misleading. Apart from that, the countless papers that mention the “calligraphy” of *Tianshu* can also be misleading. Xu Bing is not particularly interested in calligraphy, nor does he have works of his own resorting to Chinese calligraphy: “I am not particularly attracted to calligraphy because it is too self-expressive, too individualistic, too emotional for my purposes.” (quoted in Leung, 1998, p. 89). Calligraphy, being a bodily technique, an expression of the body-person, 身 *shen*, reveals the interiority of the calligrapher, his emotional states or personal sensitivity. That does not interest Xu Bing. What interests him is the architecture of Chinese characters. *Tianshu*, for example, is not – and deliberately – a work of calligraphy, but a contemporary art installation based on traditional typography and bookbinding. Movable types, not calligraphy, were ideal for conveying the impression of impersonal importance that Xu Bing wanted for *Tianshu*.

And, as we will see below, *Tianshu* rebelled, not against traditional Chinese culture nor against the massive use of writing during the Cultural Revolution, as stated in many reviews of that artwork, but against the 1980s excessive idolatry of translations of Western books on philosophy, art history, literature, etc.

A cup full of books

During the ’85 New Wave Movement, Xu Bing also devoted himself to a thorough reading of Western philosophies, listened to strings of lectures and debates, and attended as many exhibitions as he could. But it seems that he felt particularly uncomfortable with all that. For example, in 1985, Xu Bing was among the visitors of pop artist Robert Rauschenberg exhibition ROCI CHINA in Beijing.

Years later, Xu Bing would recall that, back then, he could not decide whether he liked Rauschenberg's work or not, because he knew nothing with which to compare it (Ikegami, 2009, pp. 182-3). But he compared it to the books he was reading: "At that time there was nothing that I really took away from it. In fact, it was a bit like reading Western philosophy books, that is, there was nothing that I really took away from them." (Sasaki, 2008, p. 4).

In fact, the more he read them, the more depressed he became. He was reading a lot more than he was making art. After the shortage of books during the Cultural Revolution, when most of them were banned, the excessive reading during the "cultural fever" of the 1980s became equally disappointing: "I was increasingly put off and disappointed by the game of books and culture, like a hungry man who had eaten too much too fast and was starting to feel sick." (quoted in Harper, 2003).

The sea of translations of Western books, the oceans of words from afar, had not helped Xu Bing to conceive a valuable work of art. He found himself immersed in a mix of intellectual confusion and artistic lethargy instead. He resembled the university professor who asked Nan-in, a master of the Meiji era (1868-1912), about Zen. Nan-in served him tea. He poured his visitor's cup full and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself: "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you empty your cup first?"

Xu Bing's cup was overflowing. There was an urgent need to empty it in order to be able to feel once again the thrill of life that fuels creation. Only with an empty, "clean and clear" mind, a suppression of the intellect, would it be possible to be really awoken.

Meanwhile, Xu Bing had become an avid reader of Suzuki Daisetsu Teitaro's (1870-1966) *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* 《禅学入门》 *Chanxue rumen*, translated by Xie Siwei. The book

conquered the artist in such a way that he took it everywhere with him, as if it was "a copy of Mao's *Little Red Book*" (Xu, 2005). After all those books from the West displaying a way of thinking "which takes original, simple concepts and makes them complicated" (Xu, 2005), the flow of thoughts with scarce systematization from Suzuki's book pleased him and confirmed him as an Asian: "I believe I am truly a person of the East, raised on Chinese philosophy and Zen thinking" (Xu, 2005).

Xu Bing explains informally, but eloquently, what separates these two kinds of books:

When you read this book [*An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*], you can open it at any page and read it. It is not like Western works, for instance *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where you must figure out one concept, then the next concept, and then the next one, and so on. You can't understand anything if you open it in a random paragraph, because the concepts are all linked to one another, and you can't read it without background knowledge. But this book is like reading a Chinese [hand]scroll painting. Every section you look at has a small landscape in it, and you can get a very flavourful feeling from it. [...] You can read it starting from any paragraph, so I read it very comfortably [...] Every time you read it, you have feelings and gains, so you don't need to talk about its theories, you just read the book and that is it. (Quoted in Du, Zhao, & Lin, 2010, p. 5)

读这本书，你随时打开一页就可以读，根本不像西方的著作，例如《梦的解析》，你必须把一个概念搞清楚，再搞下一个概念，再搞下一个概念，你随便打开一段读不出什么东西，因为它的这个概念都是连在一起的，你没有背景知识你是不能读的。但是这本书就跟看中国卷轴画似的，你随便看哪一段都有一个小的景观在里头，你都可以从这里获得很有味道的感觉。[...]你从哪一段看都行，所以我读得特别舒服。[...]每次读都有感受，都有收获，那你也甭谈这些理论，你就读这点书就够了 [...]

What is at stake here is much more than mastering different literary ideas and styles coming from the other side of the world. The real problem is a difference in the most basic premises and, more, in the models of thinking from the West and from East Asia. Xu Bing was feeling the inadequacy of his model of thinking for understanding the contents of Western philosophy, so logical and so argumentative.

In the West, only what follows a logical sequence, i.e., the axioms of symbolic logic, can be considered reliable knowledge. However, according to the followers of the Dao and the Zen schools, that kind of conventional and abstract knowledge can be an obstacle to obtain true knowledge. True knowledge cannot be learned through words and disobeys logic. However, books of Chinese traditional thought are not intended to provide logical knowledge, nor to make of the reader a new scholar or an unbeatable rival in theoretical debates. They are indeed not written to be discussed, but to transform the readers by suggesting them a path to a better life. Since they are not written in a linear way, they can be read profitably starting in any random page, as Xu Bing points out. Moreover, many ancient Chinese philosophical works, especially in the Dao and Zen schools, often resort to visual, poetic or imagery language, to diagrams, tales, legends, myths, metaphors...

A visual koan

However, all those books from the West would perversely and ultimately influence Xu Bing to create *Tianshu*. He decided to make his own book, a book to help people understand that it is not through book culture that meaning is created. But he was an artist. He was neither a writer nor a philosopher. He was not going to write about art and contribute to the perpetuation of the reading game. He was going to make a book as a work of art, print art, since he belonged to the print department of the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts.

He returned to his childhood library at Peking University, where he committed to an in-depth study of ancient characters, calligraphy styles, engraving and printing techniques, and the history of the book in China. He wanted to find out: “What were the Song books like, what were the Yuan books like, what were the Ming and Qing books like, what did the printings look like, what was the style like?” (cited in Du, Zhao, Li, 2010). He shunned away from all kinds of social life, from all the endless twirl of reading and debating. And his cup began to empty:

And every day when I worked on those “meaningless” characters, it was like having a dialogue with nature. There was no intrusion of knowledge or of argument. My thinking in turn became clean and clear. This was not about creating a piece of art, but about entering the realm of meditation. (quoted in Harper, 2003).

Xu Bing compares here his process of creation to meditation. On another occasion, he provides some details about the kind of meditation he is referring to: “The act of carving was like meditation, no thought needed, just the motion of the hand, the technique of the craft.” (quoted in Smith, 2005, p. 333). It was, therefore, a meditation analogous to the one that Gao Minglu mentions in his article (2003), the “gradual enlightenment” of the Zen School of the North. Xu Bing spent years performing the repetitive task of engraving thousands of unreadable “characters” in movable types. Repetitive, monotonous, manual, servile, seemingly unproductive tasks, such as walking, breathing, cleaning, sweeping leaves from the floor or carrying firewood are, for the Zen school, a superior way of self-cultivation, and they must be carried out with simplicity and precision. They are an initiation, a meditative path that opens dimensions where words do not penetrate or where their claim to attain reality is denied. Meaning is our own construction as a daily practice, the outcome of our sincere dedication to a task.

But there is a second way in which Zen is present in *Tianshu*: the effect it intends to produce. Some scholars have detected one or the other but, in fact, both ways are present in this artwork. The effect it aims to produce is very similar to that of the *koan* (公案 *gong'an* in Chinese).

Zen's distrust of language leads to two distinct practices: silence, on the one hand, and paradox, on the other. The best-known examples of paradoxes are the *koan*, a resource used mainly by the Zen Linji School of the South. For example: "What is the sound of a single hand clapping?"; "How was your face before your father and mother were born?"; "What is the colour of the wind?"

Zen lies at the intersection of the Mahayana branch of the Buddha school and the teachings of the Dao school. It inherited from the Dao school not only the urge to get rid of the conceptual network that man tends to fabricate and that separates him from reality, but the subsequent distrust for words as well. Words and concepts delimit things and forms artificially from their surroundings and are unable to express their perpetual change and interrelationships. The kind of knowledge that interests the follower of the Dao school is one that does not need words, and that frees people from the burden of their cultural constraints and their identification with the conventional mind. It is a knowledge intended to restore man to the harmony of the universe, to reconnect him to its original source and make him participate in it. This participation cannot be achieved through an intellectual accumulation of knowledge, but through the corporeal practice of the arts of breathing and of movement like *qigong*, *wushu*, *taijiquan*, but also painting, calligraphy, music, etc.

For the Zen school, similarly, understanding life can only be a participation in life, a transformative experience. Therefore, it cannot be learned from ponderous books full of well-structured theories. Quite the opposite, within Zen tradition, as within the Dao school, the practise is the "teaching without words" 不言之教 *bu yan zhi jiao* (道德经 *Dao De Jing*, chaps. 2 and 43).

The *koan* show the inadequacy of language to penetrate that privileged mental realm where all dichotomous thinking, always present in theoretical constructions and argumentative debates, fades away. Therefore, the *koan* are not accessible to the analytical mind, they cannot be subjected to intellectual resolution. They aim to produce a radical change in our level of understanding, allowing a glimpse of the nature of things, and the awakening, not to a transcendental sphere, but to the value of everyday life. However, it is necessary to empty the mind first, to disarm intellectual habits and logical dualisms.

In *Tianshu* (and in many of his later works), Xu Bing tried to reproduce the mental effect of the *koan*, that surprising effect that induces a suspension in linear thinking: how to read the book that cannot be read?

Like a *koan*, *Tianshu* initially encapsulates the viewers in thousands of characters and texts and then surprises them with the discovery that the "characters" cannot be read. By interrupting the viewers' natural impulse for reading and refusing a logical approach, it aims at emptying their minds, so that they can understand things that are impossible to understand with their cups full. Xu Bing did not want to be the only one to achieve mental clarity; he also wanted to empty the cups of those around him, so that they could find out more vital and more authentic dimensions, and free themselves from the intellectual whirlwinds of arguments in which they had become entangled.

Thus, *Tianshu*'s "texts" were conceived in such a way as to make the viewers believe that they had literal meaning precisely because they did not have it. The quantity factor and the similarity factor were persuasive elements, as were the exquisite workmanship and respectable outward appearance of books, scrolls, and posters. That appearance reinforced the viewers' idea that those "characters" had to exist and conveyed a meaningful message. From the moment the viewers realized that things were not what they seemed to be, the conventional

logic that whispered in their ears that books, scrolls, and posters full of characters were meant to be read should start to crack. By inducing an interruption in the normal flow of their thought, *Tianshu*, as a *koan*, pointed to an overcoming of the discursive and systematic logic so dear to Western thinking. And it acted in such a way on the viewer that it removed his protective layer of intellect and reduced him to silence.

It must be recognized, however, that *Tianshu*'s surprising effect as a visual *koan* has somewhat faded over time. Both in China and the West, it is now known in advance that those are invented "characters". Why, then, didn't its auratic dimension fade away as well? Why is it still surprising? I can point to three major reasons. The first two still come from Zen. In essence, the *koan* remains: how to read the book that cannot be read? In addition, even knowing in advance that the "characters" do not exist in the Chinese writing system, the paradox between their lack of literal meaning and the enormous effort needed to make a great number of books, scrolls, and posters full of them remains intriguing. The third reason is the perennial fascination exerted by the key element of the installation, the "characters", as it happens with Chinese characters with lexical meaning.

The "characters"

Xu Bing did not simply abandon Chinese writing. What he did was to use the Chinese script, not to present it as a system of linguistic signs, but to reveal its matrixial architectural structure: the system of modules, that is, of interchangeable building blocks that may be assembled in varied combinations. *Tianshu* not only uses the modular system for the formation of Chinese characters but makes it clearly visible. It can even be said that *Tianshu* celebrates it. For this to be effectively achieved, it was necessary to empty characters of their lexical meaning, as if eliminating any background noise (Figure 5).

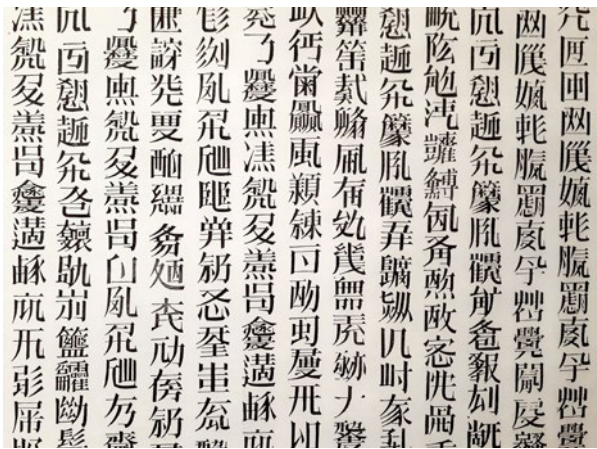


Figure 5. The "characters" of *Book From the Sky*, installation by Xu Bing. Hong Kong Museum of Art exhibition in October 2020. © Photo by Meikowkmeomi Othumddroa

However, and contrary to what has often been stated in many papers on *Tianshu*, the removal of literal meaning from Chinese characters is neither new nor offensive *per se* in China. For instance, what really matters in Chinese calligraphy is not discursive communication. The so-called "crazy cursive", 狂草 *kuangcao*, even tends towards illegibility as the aesthetic value of the brushwork is emphasized. All that matters are the gestural movements, and the breath, 气 *qi* (Figure 6). The big difference between *Tianshu* and brush calligraphy is that the former does not resource to characters with aesthetic value. On the opposite, it uses inexpressive "characters", printed in the prosaic *songti* graphic font, "characters" that refuse both to be read and to be the object of aesthetic delight. Therefore, the aim of *Tianshu*'s "characters" forcibly differs from the aim of calligraphy art.

Secondly, the removal of meaning in *Tianshu* is not complete. Since they are based on real characters, the "characters" from the installation preserve their visual dimension. And if isolated and analysed in their components by free association, a potential meaning, albeit diffuse, can be grasped from many of them (for example, when the determinative of "fire" is added to "mountain"), one that will always be dependent

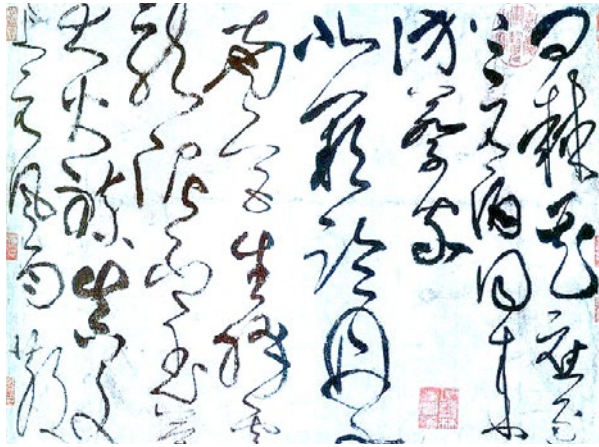


Figure 6. “Crazy cursive” (*kuangcao*) calligraphy by Zhang Xu (8th century). Public domain

on cultural analogies, verbal connections, and individual memories. *Tianshu* “characters” are located, therefore, not at the end of a scale of meaning, but in a zone of shadows between meaning and its absence.

Thirdly, assembling, and reassembling characters is also far from being unprecedented or offensive. Most of the interpretations of *Tianshu* focus on the traditional respect towards characters that is an integral part of what it means to be Chinese. The installation thus appears as an act of desecration, a blasphemous deconstruction. This point of view does not take into consideration that Chinese characters have always been subjected, by their very nature, to “manipulation”, in the sense of deconstruction and reconstruction – precisely what Xu Bing did in *Tianshu*. Due to the possibilities of visual experimentation derived from the graphic construction of characters, the invention of new “characters” departing from existing elements and following the laws of the adopted graphic regime is a phenomenon present throughout the Chinese tradition. For instance, both Chinese traditional graphomancy, 测字 *cezi*, and contemporary visual and literary arts resort to it.

Within the Chinese script it is not even easy to distinguish real characters from fake characters. In 1993, Charles Stone, an American doctoral student in Chinese literature, armed with a comprehensive

dictionary of characters, declared that it took him no more than five minutes to come across two real characters in *Tianshu*, albeit obsolete. However, it was later discovered that one of them was a “character” invented in the 19th century, without any meaning or sound (Abe, 1998, p. 118).

As the examples above show and given the intimacy between textuality and visuality that Chinese characters allow, to “play” or “manipulate” them is a well rooted practice in China. It is not a sign of disrespect for Chinese writing, as it is so often said about *Tianshu*.

All the bold proximity of *Tianshu*’s “characters” to existing characters was essential to maximize the work’s impact on the viewer. However, as they do not exist and do not have a literal meaning, they do not allow – and deliberately – any access to the world of textual culture, neither in Chinese nor in any other human language. So, what do they give access to?

Patterns and images

First, it is of paramount importance to have in mind that in the realm of belief, legends and myths, Chinese characters were not invented to transcribe speech, but to understand the world and be able to act upon it. According to myth, the inventor of Chinese writing was Cang Jie 仓颉, a figure with whom Xu Bing has often been identified with, as he also invented an entire “script”. He himself refers Cang Jie when asked to explain his artworks (cf. Xu, 1998).

Cang Jie was the official who kept records at the court of the legendary Yellow Emperor 黄帝 *Huangdi* (2898–2679 BC). Owner, not of two, but of four eyes, when he gazed at heaven and earth he could see much more and much better than ordinary human beings. Quoting Zhang Huaiguan 张怀瓘 in the *Shu Duan* 书断 (*Appreciation of Calligraphy*), of the Tang dynasty, The *Taiping Yulan* 太平御览, an encyclopaedia of the Song dynasty, states that Cang Jie “observed the course of the Kui stars from above and, below, the images, 像 *xiang*, of

the patterns, 文 *wen*, of turtles and the tracks of birds. He started from all that beauty to create the characters.” 仰观奎星圜曲之势，俯察龟文鸟迹之像，采乎众美，合而为字。

This grasping of patterns is called “establishing images”, 立象 *lixiang*. *Lixiang* is a fundamental Chinese way of thinking and living in the world, the main cognitive process for the understanding of nature. It is the bifurcated experience of ‘looking at things grasping images’ 观物取象 *guanwu quxiang*, and “looking at images grasping meaning” 观象取意 *guanxiang quyi* (Jia, 2008, p. 33). Visual and imagery dimensions occupy a privileged place in Chinese thought. “Thinking by images” allows the overcoming of the limits of discursive language. Therefore, the Chinese believed that the transmission of non-verbal and non-linear ideas, such as cosmic structures and the processes of nature, becomes easier if done in a visual and symbolic way. Chinese thought is devoted to the construction of diagrams (图 *tu*), like the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Yi Jing* (*Book of Changes*), of characters (small diagrams themselves), of metaphors and of symbols: “the visual imaginary, in the broadest sense of signs, allegories, metaphors and the entire symbolic universe of references, plays a dominant role, both in the Confucian and Taoist corpus.” (Marinelli, 2012, p. 4).

The acute awareness of the limits of conventional language has a very long history in China. Nakamura notes, for example, that unlike ancient Greece and India, where metaphysical theories were explained through complex sets of discursive statements, when the teachings of Buddha were introduced in China, they were rather explained by recurring to diagrams and concrete images. This tendency is very evident in Zen Buddhism, Nakamura providing several examples (1964, pp. 179-84).

Designing diagrams was, therefore, a superior way of acquiring and communicating knowledge, since the reason for their existence is to make the invisible visible. They are “visual presentations, as a medium connecting the realm of what is intelligible

to the realm of what is imperfectly knowable, thus mediating between known and unknown.” (Wang, 2012, p. 204). Much more than representing, diagrams explain non-discursively ideas that are more abstract, complex or difficult to verbalize. And they achieve this by stimulating mental activity, especially creativity: to grasp them, one needs to bring into presence elements that are absent. To extract new and implicit meanings, the reader is compelled to “manipulate” them, and to correlate the information they convey.²

Let us now return to the myth of Cang Jie. In the *Huainan Zi* 淮南子 (*The Masters of Huainan*), a compilation of philosophical texts completed and presented to the imperial throne in 139 a. C., as well as in later works, it can be read that “when, in antiquity, Cang Jie invented writing, millet rained from the sky and ghosts wailed at night.” 昔者苍颉作书，而天雨粟，鬼夜哭。The invention of writing was therefore not good news for the ghosts. In one of his notes, Gao Yu 高诱 explains this in this way: “the character for ‘ghost’, 鬼 *gui*, is sometimes written as that for ‘rabbit’, 兔 *tu*, and as rabbits fear that their fur be pulled out to make brushes, [the ghosts feared] that this evil would spread to them, and so they wept at night.” 鬼或作兔，兔恐见取毫作笔，害及其躯，故夜哭。Just because the character for ‘ghost’ and ‘rabbit’ can be confused, this explanation makes it plausible that humanity confuses ghosts with rabbits. This is very interesting indeed, as it shows how, for the Chinese, characters and things they refer share the same nature. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a metaphor in which being transformed into a brush means being transformed into a script. But why would ghosts be afraid of a script?

² About the importance of images and diagrams in Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese thought in general see Bray, F., Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, V., and Métaillé, G. (2007); Huang, S. S. 黄士珊 (2012); Mollier, C. (2008); and the above quoted Marinelli, M. (2012).

I believe that their fear can be understood considering that characters embody the “true form”, 真形 *zhenxing*, of phenomena and things. “True form” refers to image, *xiang* 象, a notion of capital importance in Chinese thought. In *Dao De Jing* (ch. 35), Dao itself, the origin of the Ten Thousand Things, is called “Great Image” 大象 *da xiang*. Images are “an unmediated expression of the Dao that cannot be modified.” (Steavu-Balint, 2010, p. 232). They are, therefore, similar to what we would call today the ‘formula’ of things and phenomena, although this formula is currently believed to be mathematical and not imagistic, grammatical or diagrammatic. By creating a script, Cang Jie would obtain the ‘formula’ of things, and when you obtain the formula, you obtain the control. That is why the ghosts wept: they knew that, from then on, they would be tamed and prevented from haunting people. By mastering a script, humankind had opened a new channel of communication between heaven and earth. Therefore, they had better access to the Dao of Heaven and could gain a better understanding of the workings of nature. Hereafter it was possible to make millet rain from the sky and thus prevent hunger among the people. This interpretation seems to be supported by the following extract from *Lidai Minghua Ji* 历代名画记 (*Notes on Famous Paintings Through the Ages*), by Zhang Yanyuan 张彦远, a scholar of the Tang dynasty, who explains that: “Natural transformations could no longer hide their secrets, so from the sky rained millet; spirits and demons could no longer hide their forms, so the ghosts wailed.” 造化不能藏其秘，故天雨粟；灵怪不能遁其形，故鬼夜哭。

A sacred script

For the Chinese, all things contain a diagram-image that needs to be grasped in order to understand their nature. Once grasped, you can act upon things and

situations. The expert of the *Yi Jing* 易经 (*Book of Changes*) does not use it as a mere oracle but, when facing a certain situation, knows which of the 64 hexagrams corresponds to it, and therefore also knows how to transform it in case it is needed.

Like diagrams and hexagrams, characters reveal the deepest structures of nature and manage to act upon it, operating like a spell. Chinese characters were conceived not to be mere phonetic references of a conceptual discourse but as incorporations of the cosmos and things. Their ontological density endows them with action power. They are not conventional signs or simple human inventions, but part of the fabric of the world from which they were extracted. Therefore, they can change the course of the world. For example, if an infant’s horoscope is lacking one of the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire or earth), as a form of compensation he will be given a name whose characters include the missing element. The child’s future destiny will consequently be balanced and happy. And a paper where someone wrote the character “death” was traditionally believed as capable of bringing death, just as the character of “disease” would tend to provoke disease.

In fact, according to historical data, Chinese script “was developed by specialists in divination and used to record ritual actions concerning spirits” (Seidel, 1989, p. 252). It was not created for human communication, but for the communication between humans and the spirits, 神 *shen*, of ancestors or natural forces. Even though a mature script is always phonetic and manages to represent orality, this does not necessarily mean that the original motivation for its invention was the representation of orality.

The connection between writing and spirits is still clearly alive in the Dao school, as well as in the Buddha school. It can be found in the practice of esoteric scripts meant to communicate with spirits and ancestors. They are called, precisely, “celestial scripts” *tianshu* 天书, the name Xu Bing gave to his installation (Figure 7). Those scripts are not

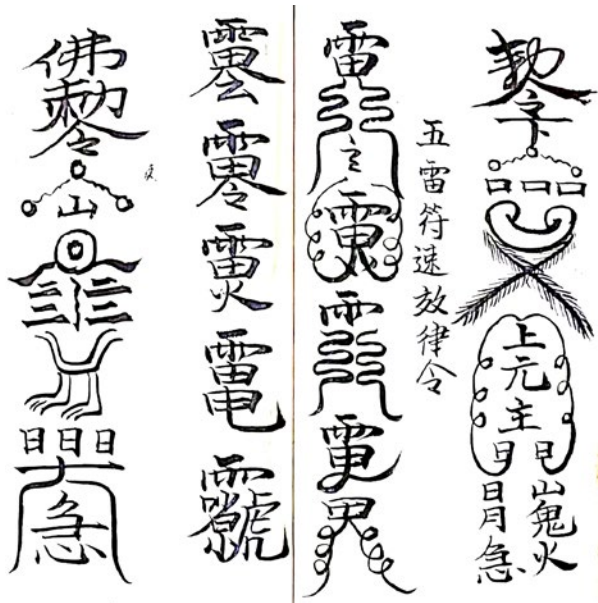


Figure 7. Taoist magic script from *The Complete Volume of Magical Talismans for Treating Diseases* (治病靈符妙用全卷). Public domain

intended to transcribe human speech. They are not meant to be read. Since they are intended for communion with heaven and the spirits, ancestors, and deities that inhabit it, esoteric scripts must necessarily differ from secular scripts. It is in the secular context that writing is used as a mean for communication and transmission of information and that people must understand each other. But esoteric scripts express ineffable meanings that cannot be conveyed through conventional communication, whether oral or written. They are an embodiment of forces and power, primordial energies of nature. Thus, the unintelligibility of talismanic and esoteric “celestial scripts” is far from a “lack of meaning”; that unintelligibility rather asserts their celestial origin, their sacred nature. The more illegible, the more meaningful, as they are closer to heaven.

Xu Bing had come into close contact with “celestial scripts” during his three-year stay in the village of Shouliang Gou in the final days of the Cultural Revolution. He was deeply impressed by them. He even confessed that there was in the

village “a ghostly air to it that settled upon me, influencing all of my creative work that followed.” (Xu, 2008). Only in the village had he been able to find these scripts because, after the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, such practices were banned, as they were considered “superstitions of the old society”. As Xu Bing grew up in the capital and during the Cultural Revolution, he knew nothing about them.

I believe *Tianshu* is imbued with the tradition of the Dao school of writing celestial scripts that point to levels of meaning other than lexical. With this artwork, Xu Bing transformed characters from visual and phonetic symbols to visual symbols, as if prior to human speech or external to it. He did so via the same process of formation of esoteric scripts, “decomposing the forms”, 散形 *sanxing*, and then “assembling the forms”, 聚形 *juxing* (Huang, 2018, p. 67). Visually, however, Xu Bing’s “characters” look more like conventional characters than like most “celestial” and talismanic characters. He did not want his *Tianshu* to look obviously “heavenly” or “celestial”. On the one hand, Xu Bing wanted his “characters” to look like conventional ones that ask for a literal reading, in order to achieve the *koan* effect of surprising and confusing the viewers. On the other hand, he wanted to draw attention to conventional characters, their inner architecture, visual power and magical dimension.

Xu Bing’s stroke of genius with this artwork was to hide the transgression of the Dao and Zen schools – their non-institutionalized “characters” that do not fit into any discursive order – under the “cultural”, official, institutional, and literate façade of the Ru school (Confucianism), with books and scrolls displaying a venerable classical look:

If the Confucians later assumed this official tradition of writing in imperial China, it is because they were [...] the masters of the text, that is, of the moral and political tradition embodied in the historical document, while the Taoists remained the masters of the sign. (Seidel, 1989, p. 252)

Conclusion

In my view, *Tianshu* is connected not to Western and nihilistic views of meaninglessness and anti-writing, but to the traditional preference for visualization in Chinese thought, as well as to the Daoist tradition of writing celestial and talismanic scripts that point to other levels of meaning than textuality. Xu Bing himself remarked in 2002 that “the book [of Heaven] turns out to be fantastic, like a sacred writing.” (quoted in Jiang, 2007, p. 45).

Therefore, *Tianshu* is not “anti-writing”, “absurd” or “non-sense”, nor is it a denial of Chinese culture, as many Western scholars have stated. And it is not a desecration of the Chinese script; on the contrary, it is largely about Chinese characters, and it is a recreation and even a concrete path towards nonverbal forms of traditional Chinese thought.

When Xu Bing removed sound and meaning from characters, he was redirecting the viewer's mind to their original nature as images, and to mental dimensions other than logical and discursive: visual, imagery, symbolic. These are dimensions that had always been there, but were submerged under Western influences, Marxist first, and, during the Deng Xiaoping period, from many other sources, and so deeply, that Xu Bing decided to open a new channel of communication between heaven and earth with his *Tianshu*.

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Bio

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