

Xu Bing and Banal Nationalism



BROADSHEET INVITED DR. YAO SOUCHOU, SENIOR LECTURER, DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, TO LAUNCH ITS PREVIOUS ISSUE 31/3 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA CITY WEST CAMPUS, ON 30 AUGUST THIS YEAR, IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE SA SCHOOL OF ART. THE FOLLOWING TEXT IS A REVISED VERSION OF HIS 'BOOKS FROM HEAVEN: WORDS, MODERNITY, SILENCE', A REFLECTION UPON CHINA'S SILENCE IN THE "INTERROGATION OF ITS CIVILISATION AND LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS", IN WHICH HE ARGUED THAT THIS ERASURE OF WORDS AND TEXTS IS MOST EVIDENT IN THE WORKS OF XU BING, WHOSE *TIAN SHU* OR *A BOOK FROM THE SKY* FORMED THE BASIS OF HIS TALK

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I first came across the work of Chinese artist Xu Bing in 1994 when I was living in Singapore. With its largely Chinese population, Singapore has always fancied itself as a 'Chinese city' in the middle of Southeast Asia. As the changing political climate – not to mention the strong Singapore dollar – drives many local Chinese back to the 'ancestral home', Singapore is an interesting site from which to contemplate the entangled meanings of things Chinese. *Tian Shu* is normally translated in the West as *A Book From the Sky*. Since the word *tian* denotes not only 'sky' but also the more spiritual or transcendental notion of 'heaven', the title of Xu Bing's work might be more appropriately renamed *A Book From Heaven*. After its first showing in Beijing in October 1988, *Tian Shu* has since gone to the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and Italy where it featured at the 1993 Venice Biennale. Xu Bing was a former lecturer in printmaking in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. He left China in 1990 a year after Tiananmen and has since then been living and working in the United States, currently in New York. In the 1980s he spent three years carving more than four thousand characters on wood blocks. From these he produced with a traditional press a series of scrolls and books which were then bound and mounted in a number of ways. They are glued on notice boards like the 'big character posters' [*da zi bao*] found in China, hung from the ceiling like the ancient scrolls of Buddhist script, or simply bound in traditional book form.

What is remarkable about *Tian Shu* is that the characters in these finely crafted works are in fact meaningless, nonsense script. These 'words' are made up of recognisable radicals or parts of Chinese words; these are 'arbitrarily' put together to give birth to something that has the appearances of standard Chinese characters. *Tian Shu* is therefore an elaborate conceit. To anyone who reads Chinese or knows something of the idiosyncrasy of Chinese calligraphic form, the work offers immense aesthetic pleasure, one that gives these nonsense words a specific 'sense'. From the immaculately crafted characters to its traditional binding and collectors' commentary, the work shows all the strict discipline that has gone into its making. And it is undoubtedly this observance of form, this reproduction of a traditional calligraphic aesthetics, which makes reading/viewing *Tian Shu* such an intriguing experience.

Yet, as Fredric Jameson has said, there is "no pleasure in its own right"; it can only be "experienced laterally", "as a by-product of something else".¹ When we take pleasure as an end in itself, it quickly turns into a restless and an insatiable passion. Xu Bing is no Sade or Don Juan; but there is the same slippery turn in his work. Half drowned by its beauty, we are caught unaware by the 'nonsense' always already in the work. The immense enjoyment of *Tian Shu* is followed by betrayal. From an immaculate resurrection of traditional calligraphic form to its gentle dismissal as pure illusion: here lies the grim paradox of *Tian Shu*. Writers and curators in the West have generally interpreted Xu Bing's work as a critique of Chinese literary culture. If it is indeed so, then the 'nonsense words' must confront their ambivalence, and the question: how is one to negotiate a traditional aesthetic form that is both an index of literary achievement and a marker that summons the memories of feudal horror in China's past?

For me, I find it hard to read *Tian Shu* purely as a work of 'cultural negation' – if only because the exquisite calligraphy demands its own reckoning. Walter Benjamin had a similar view of the power of German baroque tragedy. The seventeenth century *Trauerspiel*, like *Tian Shu*, claims a smug identity apart from its function as embodiment of meaning; it achieves integrity of form through the "world of written language [that remains] self-sufficient and intent on the display of its own substance".² The *Tian Shu*'s critical posture is anything but straightforward. Certainly the creation of the 'heavenly words' injects 'nonsense' into a literary culture of a proud and an ancient civilisation. For all the breast-beating Chinese chauvinism cannot outdo the quick sleight of hand, the ephemeral attempt to make up at will classical texts and lexicons that, for a moment, stand as real. That such an illusion can be so easily conjured up, a civilisation's past can be so casually brought to the surface, is a powerful indictment indeed. Yet as a critique, *Tian Shu* still requires the protocol of form that is itself a sign of that ancient culture. In the crossing over between sense and nonsense, literary enjoyment and its betrayal, *Tian Shu* decries its own criticality.

But for Chinese, and for other people too, it is above all enjoyment – of food, of the arts and a thousand and one 'national things' – which binds one to one's culture. Enjoyment enhances culture's ideological effects; but it also prompts us to take things of our culture in their entirety: as a repertoire of texts and effects sustained by the promises of pleasure. Each time I think of the ideological travesty of Confucianism, I recall other more benign philosophic texts that help to lighten the existential burden of living: all these are Chinese classic culture proper. For me what is fascinating about the 'heavenly words' of *Tian Shu* is the way they give life to this dialectic of desire. Tracing the intricate contour of a cultural longing, *Tian Shu* summons up the cultural memories of China's dynastic history and civilisational achievements. Whatever poststructuralism says, the 'sense' of *Tian Shu* can only be discerned by reading 'beyond the text,' by the meditation of history. It is not only that the aesthetic form which embodies the 'nonsense' has a place in the cultural order of things; it also works 'laterally' by recalling the repertoire of other 'nonsense scripts' in Chinese society. This is a rehabilitative, nationalistic moment in Xu Bing's work. With a wink of recognition, one thinks of Nu Shu, the esoteric script used by women to express their inner world of feminine friendship, patriarchal repression and domestic practicalities.³ In a book of Nu Shu from Kan Yan district in southern Hunan, the coded writing celebrates 'sisterhood' formed outside the family, and, above all, *for she ku* or 'telling bitterness' by older women, especially widows, who in the state of unbearable loneliness, try to shake off their memories and sorrow.

Then there are also 'heavenly words' invented by a Chinese secret society like the Tian Ti Hui ['Heaven and Earth Lodge'] to incarnate its shadowy world of arcane rituals and violent brotherhood. Fu or charm papers filled with nonsense characters encoded with Chinese astrological principles were dispensed to the faithful to give them magical power and protection.

For those who have visited a Chinese temple in China or Southeast Asia, there are more familiar examples of *fu*. These are 'heavenly scripts' offered by temple priests, often written in blood from self-mutilation – cutting the tongue or slicing the back with a sword – while in a trance. Other scripts of this kind are found in ritual papers for burning to appease the dead.



In all these forms, *fu* is characterised by its stylistic elaboration and formalistic license. They are built on, but never erase, the familiar words of the secular world. Enmeshed in a world of esoteric ritual and blood-letting, *fu* characters make up what Bakhtin calls an ‘absolute language’: semantically bounded and self-referential, a language that speaks only to itself.⁴ *Fu* characters as much as the nonsense words of Nu Shu are similar linguistic signs unified by social secrecy and ritual usage. However esoteric they are, these nonsense writings nevertheless claim a place in the social order of things. Just as *fu* gestures a supplication to the spirit by an anxious mortal world, *Tian Shu* calls up a culture’s aesthetic repertoire in order to interrogate its evil and achievement. Just as *fu* characters are signs for the heavenly realm and yet of this world, Xu Bing’s imaginary words must reach back and wrestle with Chinese culture’s past in order to examine its pleasure and repressive effects in the present.

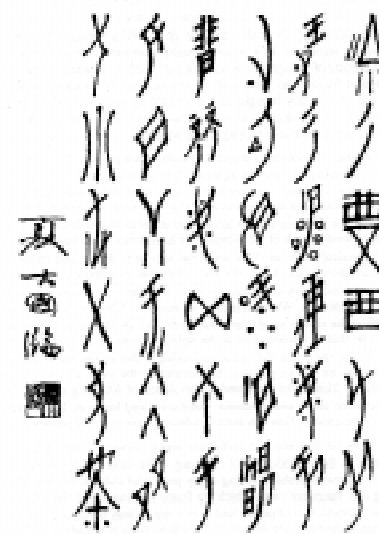


Scroll of nonsense characters by Xu Bing

In this way, *Tian Shu* becomes gently complicit with a cultural project it tries to destabilise. The pleasure it offers is a sensuous pampering of desire, and a powerful affirmation of a traditional literary skill and the social status of those who have acquired it. For them, the effect of *Tian Shu* is to evoke through its cultural imagining, a ‘literary community’. It is a ‘community’ based on a common pedagogic experience, a knowledge/power coming from the ability to recognise and understand Chinese literary form as a cultural trope. The sense of ‘membership’ may be only a vague feeling of a shared [Chinese] cultural knowledge and identity. But it is no less effective in embracing those in the know, and excluding others outside the bond of discursive knowledge and social experience.

In this sense, *Tian Shu* can be more appropriately read as a sophisticated enactment that both valorises and deconstructs the glory of Chinese classical text. In response to a traditional aesthetic form, neither glorification nor anxious erasure will do. This is an ambivalence that has long plagued the Chinese modern sensibility. The moment we decry Chinese culture’s ideological travesty, we also long for its redemptive possibilities in the modern world. Committed to intellectual liberalisation in the post-Mao era, and living then in Beijing, Xu Bing engaged his critique very much ‘within’ China. Of his choice of 4,000 words in *Tian Shu*, he said in an interview with Christina Davidson in Sydney in June 1993:

*You talk about it being a critique. I think it is. I created about 4,000 words. Why 4,000 words? Because Chinese government publications often use about 4,000 words. This is the number of commonly used words in Chinese newspapers and official texts. The Chinese government doesn’t like my work too much now because the government doesn’t like the people thinking too much.*⁵



Script of Nu Shu from southern Hunan, China

The 4,000 words in *Tian Shu* thus intend to reproduce the ‘numerical weight’ of Chinese characters in daily use. Xu Bing is recalling here the familiar critique of the ‘structural tyranny’ of Chinese pictograms which have an immobilising effect on Chinese thoughts. And he wants his art to do things in a way he does not expect of Western art, as he explains to an American interviewer:

*In China, because of a very particular cultural and political background, because of their particular experiences, artists feel that there are things they have to do... Rebellion must have a target... As a result, Chinese artists think about larger questions, they try to do more with their art.*⁶

“Rebellion must have a target” sounds decidedly quaint in this postmodern era of moral and political nihilism. What Xu Bing’s project generally underlines is the dramatic political and ideological shift of post-Mao China. From its first showing in Beijing’s China Art Gallery in October 1988, *Tian Shu*, with its bitter and ironic intervention in Chinese culture and politics, has helped to reflect the alienation among those students and intellectuals whose demands for change culminated in the Tiananmen demonstration of June 1989. What was spoken for so passionately in that summer in Beijing was something intensely national; as they clamoured for freedom and political reform, the demonstrator wanted above all else democracy for and within China.

This nationalist concern stirs up dreams and wishes that go back to the tumultuous struggle for modern China – from Kang Youwie’s reform at the end of the Qing Dynasty to the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Faced with Japanese imperial ambition in Northeast China, and China’s own immobility under a corrupt and inexperienced government, it was necessary for the brilliant men and women of the May Fourth time to radically question all that they perceived to be the roots of China’s problems. They wanted reform or, more frequently, outright rejection of institutions of the feudal past – parental control, arranged marriage, concubinage, bound feet for women – and significantly, replacing classical literary form with vernacular Chinese [*bai hua*, or ‘plain speech’] as the tool for expressing modern thoughts and feelings. But the concern for cultural renewal and self-liberation was underlined by the pressing issue of ‘saving the nation’ [*jiu guo*]. *Jiu guo* politicised the pursuit of modernity and westernisation. So the central issues of May Fourth as much as Tiananmen were concerned with reworking China’s past – weighed down by turbid cultural forms and corrupt bureaucracy and leadership – in order to move the nation to a modern political future.

All the power and aesthetics of *Tian Shu* resonate with this historical project. A certain national longing mutes its critical evaluation of Chinese literary culture. It is also this longing which helps to make sense of Xu Bing’s palpable complicity. Western curators and critics have largely ignored this aspect of Xu Bing’s work. It is as if in the breathtaking meditation of Chinese cultural form, in the contemplation of the pleasure and tyranny of Chinese literary texts lies a shameful secret, one from which the artist has to be protected by the community of admirers. And what is this secret, this mark of a ‘lack’ except cultural nationalism? In regards to the arts or any representational endeavour, we are entering a perplexing terrain.



Fu or amulet of Tien Ti Hui for protecting one’s life in battle



Nationalism is not good news these days. It casts a long shadow over the duplicitous optimism in the new millennium. From Bosnia to Rwanda, Chechnya to Northern Ireland, the nationalist struggle calls up a fatal mixture of violence and ethnic bigotry. As the deadly drama of racial exclusion and ethnic cleansing is being played out, nationalism has become an aberration in the contemporary world. Is not the return to the 'local', the rallying cry around common descent by blood, an anomaly in an increasingly borderless world of global interconnections? Unable to fathom the depth and the spell of these ethnic aspirations, the view from Washington, London and Geneva is to give them an Orientalist twist. What compels the nationalist projects in these places, it is often argued, is the 'unreasonable passion' of Others still longing for the timeless primordial community of the pre-modern era. Fired by such archaic longing, these nationalist projects are seen as the work of separatists, guerrillas and terrorists doing their evil worst in the periphery of the civilised centre.

But a question can nonetheless be asked: Is Bosnia or Northern Ireland the only fate of nationalism? Does national enjoyment always prompt one to the 'unreasonable passion' that tragically prepares the way for ethnic cleansing? It is all very well for Žižek to link the banal pleasures of the national thing with its excessive and violent articulations, arguing that each is supported by the same structure of *jouissance*.⁷ It is as if one has not the will to distinguish the delight of Chinese tea or brush calligraphy from the masochistic bliss of genocide. Psychoanalytical reductionism would have us believe that ethnic/cultural pleasures prey on us like original sin, the redemption from which is only possible through a blood letting of genocidal rage. For the enjoyment of say, folk music – which even Gellner⁸ confesses moves him to tears, with the help of a little alcohol – is, socially, ethically and phenomenologically, a long way from the sadistic thrill of ethnic cleansing. All this we too easily forget. Confronting the horrifying spectre of ethno-nationalism, we anxiously do away with other national things, banal and innocuous as they are. Yet nationalism is not all those terrible things only Others do 'over there', we long for them as pathetically and passionately in our home ground. As we scream support for the Australian cricket team against South Africa or Sri Lanka, as we imagine a new sense of identity after we get rid of the British Monarchy as our head of state, we too willingly succumb to nationalism's banal enchantment.

What is at stake in the 'strategic [mis]reading' of *Tian Shu* is no less than the idea of art practice in the current world. For the conservative funding regime for the arts as much as the modish postmodern turn in contemporary culture are tracked by the same impulses of the global political economy. Both figure themselves within the same cultural and political temporality. That contemporary art theory and practices are the work of capital's expansive movement some may find contentious. But few, I think, would disagree with the fact that the current reconfiguration of the world is no mere backdrop to the 'institutional changes' facing art practitioners today; it intrudes upon and reshapes the very premise of their enterprises. In the 'brave new world' of ever more dazzling techno-scientific innovations, ever more voluptuous promises of consumption and global freedom, discursive opportunities are aplenty for inscribing, consciously and neurotically, the blanket defacing of normative humanism.

What does engagement of the arts mean in the postmodern world of swirling temporality and shifting spatial order? Xu Bing's strategy is to haul back history and national longing to his work. Moving uncertainly between cultural affirmation and ideological critique, the irony of *Tian Shu*, the smug binary of culture's pleasure and its negation into disarray. What it tells is not some totalising narrative of the Central Kingdom as the ultimate goal of national community, but a melancholic 'culturalism'. Nurtured by the conviction in Chinese culture's worth, yet refusing its chauvinistic endorsement, this 'culturalism' gives *Tian Shu* its distinctive discursive anxiety. If we are not fooled by the state rhetoric, Chinese culture – both in ideas and aesthetic forms – is in varying degrees open and pluralistic. It has also involved a deal of borrowing from the powerful foreign

Others at the border – from the invading Jin and Mongols in the 12th Century to the British and Japanese in the nineteenth and twentieth. Closure and openness are the ambivalent fate of Chinese modern sensibility, just as 'sense' and 'nonsense' are the twin destinies of Chinese words as we find them in daily life, in their ritual performances, in their uses both as ideological tool and for pleasure. Is this the dynamic vector of the 'socially real' that grants Chinese nationalism – and the aesthetics of *Tian Shu* – redemption? For the nationalism which Xu Bing secretly affirms is not about inscribing a pristine subject-hood constituted by the bourgeois fiction of self-realisation. Rather it is one formed by a modern sensibility nurtured by historical memory, cultural pleasure and above all, the struggle for 'national survival' [*jiu guo*]. In this struggle, the 'nonsense' of Chinese classical text is not the vindictive empty gesture of postmodernism but a deliberate, virulent injection of 'normative possibilities' in the cultural longing itself.

Nationalism too, for all its horror, holds a similar promise. Not the nationalism of ethnic cleansing, but that of banal pleasure; not that of racial exclusion but one that galvanises the struggle against forgetting. But then I am speaking as a local. For nationalism as a gathering point for the anti-West, anti-imperialist movement in 19th Century China found its counterpart in similar struggles in Indo-China, Malaya, Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia a century and a half later. Without this nationalist imagining there would not be a Mao, a Sukarno, or a Ho Chi Minh. If nationalism in Asia was a progressive force in the past, it has the elegiac task in the present of resisting the hegemonic move of globalisation and transnational capital. Speaking of the civil society as much as of contemporary art practices in the region, what is taking place is no mere celebration of the fetishistic, national thing. Politically self-conscious, energised by the debate about the nature of the postcolonial world, much of Southeast Asian art is about an ardent insistence on the 'local'. Such insistence ruptures the monopolistic claim of the nation-state, but irresistibly steers the works to the geographically and perhaps culturally specific sense of 'locality.' Consider for instance Malaysian artist Simryn Gill's enigmatic meditation on personal [dis]location in *Washed Up* [1993] shown at the 1993 Venice Biennale. The floating glass pieces that make up *Washed Up* were collected from the beaches in Singapore and Malaysia near the Malacca Straits, literally debris of sea voyages and oceanic trade, of past empires and diasporic movements. Against these memories, *Washed Up* has to confront the very ambivalence if not futility of its own representational ambition. For the movements of goods and peoples across the region are not just events of the colonial and pre-modern past[s], but happenings that link the past with the present. Is this not the classic import of memory, the very source of the Benjaminesque nostalgia? For Simryn Gill, as much for Xu Bing, to insist on the – national and geographical – 'local' is to insist on certain immunity from the capacious appetite of that barely discernible move of globalisation in which transnational capital hides itself. The 'words' in *Tian Shu* and those fired onto the glass pieces in *Washed Up* are pregnant with a sense of their tragic disruption. Yet it is precisely in this disruption that the artists are able to enact the return to the normal/normative evaluation of things, and an all important 'sense' of the very 'nonsense' of their works.

Notes

- 1 F. Jameson, 'Pleasure: A political issue', in Formations Editorial Collective [eds], *Formations of Pleasure*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983: 1, 2
- 2 W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne. London: NLB, 1977: 201
- 3 See C. Silber, 'From Daughter to Daughter-in-Law in the Women's Script of Southern Hunan', in C. K. Gilmartin et al [eds], *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994, and L. M. Zhao, *Nu Shu: yi ge jing ren de fa xian* [*Nushu-An Astonishing Discovery*] Beijing: Qing hua da xue chu ban she, 1990
- 4 M. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981
- 5 C. Davidson, 'Word from Heaven', *Art and Asia Pacific*, Vol 1, No 2, 1994: 48–55
- 6 J. S. Taylor, 'Non-Sense in Context: Xu Bing's Art and its Publics', *Public Culture*, No 5, Vol 2, 1993: 324–325
- 7 S. Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, No 225, 1997: 28–51
- 8 E. Gellner, 'Replies to the Critics', *New Left Review*, No 221, 1997: 81–118



This and previous pages: Xu Bing, *A Book from the sky*, 1998
Photos courtesy the artist