What is Chinese?

In choosing this title, I am not attempting the arduous endeavor of explaining Chinese language within any expectable length. "What is Chinese?" was the immediate question that came to mind when I had my first look at Xu Bing's work, *Book from the Sky* at the United Art Museum in Wuhan, the city where I grew up. It was quite an accident for me to discover *Book from the Sky*, since I was only offhandedly interested in Chinese artists who got famous abroad. The substance of their work was far less interesting to me than the reasons for their fame. The museum was one street from my apartment but this luxurious proximity did not bring me into the exhibition. Instead, it took a curious invitation from my friend usually indifferent to art to finally convince me to go. Following my first encounter with the work, "What is Chinese" surfaced as an initial question to start an intellectual quest into the linguistic and historical complexities of this grandiose installation with few textual explanations.

The architectural setup of the work seems to intentionally marginalize and anonymize the Chinese language itself. *Book from the Sky* is an installation of books and scrolls printed from carved wood type blocks of invented characters. The work transforms a huge part of the gallery into a temple-like space filled with printed texts in the forms of hanging scrolls, wall panels, and bound books. The floor is largely occupied by a rectangular area of carefully arranged books. The books are all facing directly upwards at scrolls, hung horizontally, facing down. The scrolls span a similar width as the books below, serving as their skyward counterpart. Xu capitalizes on the museum's space and arranges the work like an architecture so as to give the two-dimensional works altogether a three-dimensional appearance, while the composition gives the two-

dimensional works a sense of three-dimensional depth. The space between different parts invites

the audience to walk through this "temple" and examine individual prints. However, audiences

always will firstly experience the dwarfing effect of the scale itself, then the engaging feeling of

the uncanny space, the suffocating reaction to the enclosed rendering and finally the

anonymizing representation of the language itself. The magic happens when the audience tries to

read each character only to be surprised and thwarted by the fact that all the characters are

meaningless—they are only made to look like Chinese characters. When one was confronted

with over 4000 "Chinese characters," but also isolated in such a meditative space, one would

start to ponder the nature of Chinese language itself, especially in such an architectural space

which made it more difficult instead of easier to scrutinize the basic units of written Chinese

language -"characters."

A mechanical anatomy of the Chinese language might not answer the second question,

but it might throw some light on the linguistic background of Xu's work. As a noun in the

English context, Chinese means the Chinese language, but more specifically, Chinese is a group

of related languages used by the people of China that are often mutually unintelligible in their

spoken form but share a single system of writing and that constitute a branch of the Sino-

Tibetan language family.[1] If the first question were, "What is Chinese?" then the next logical

question would be: What is language? The question of mutual intelligibility in the Chinese

family of languages is thought-provoking, and instantly complicates any easy definition of

Chinese. Although another culture might conventionally think of Chinese as a homogenous

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[1] "Chinese," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* accessed November 21, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Chinese

language, like Japanese or English(even in these two instances are untrue), the fact that mutual intelligibility only extends to the written form imposes a sort of oral illiteracy across dialects. In other words, people from different regions of China cannot understand each other orally, but they all use the same written language. This is an important characteristic of Chinese. This underscores our question: What is language? A little bit of background knowledge from linguistic philosophy might save us from opening a Russian doll of infinite questions. Linguistic philosophy defines the concept of language according to three models: behavioral patterns, object, and true conditions. We will focus on the first model: behavioral patterns.

Simply put, in the case of the Chinese language, we need to find the common patterns for Chinese to be Chinese. For example, there might be a common pattern behind all the circumstances in which people will use "Ni Hao," meaning "Hello." However, this common pattern was subject to relentless changes due to the semantic change inflicted by political changes like the Cultural Revolution. The circumstance where "Ni Hao" was used on day one might not be the circumstance where "Ni Hao" was used on day two. The non-stop semantic during the revolution introduced multiple new meanings yet abandoned the old meanings for many other words or sentences like "Ni Hao," thereby eroding a stable definition of a large part of Chinese vocabulary. Confronted with this situation, people had to learn the new meanings and unlearn the old meanings, resulting in a mental exhaustion, or in other words, "feeling tired and lost of words" leading to a linguistic exhaustion, or in other words, "becoming speechless." In fact, the pronunciation or the written form of Chinese language itself became an empty vessel for flowing meanings. Consequently, the language users'

exhaustive feeling and the eroded function of a definitive pattern for language itself leads to the "no meaning" of language as a dialectical opposite of "having too many meanings." When looking at Xu's work, the audience always has the feeling of being buried in an ocean of information, a blackhole of meanings, because the characters can overwhelm the audience with the fact that these characters can mean nothing or anything. They are all subject to personal and arbitrary interpretations. Therefore, one way to think about the meaninglessness of the work is to interpret "no meaning" as a dialectical opposite of "having too many meanings" or "being lost in too many meanings." I take this interpretation as my point of departure for an analysis of semantic change, which is now possible because of the fixed system of reference when using the behavioral pattern model.

In Xu's work, the question, "What is Language?" might be answered as language is a container susceptible to versatile behavioral patterns. The relentless semantic change of Chinese means the Chinese language as a container is constantly emptied and refilled with new behavioral patterns. The semantic change happened most dramatically during the Cultural Revolution, when Xu came of age. Nobody has ever successfully summarized all the behavioral patterns of the Chinese language. The best tools we can use here are called linguistic formulae, one important instance of the behavioral patterns of a language. "Formulae are cultural as well as linguistic artifacts. Speakers create and speech communities license them for the formulae to code particular routine events and perceptions of events in which people in those communities then communicate in a common way."[2] The application of

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[2] Ji Feng Yuan, Koenraad Kuiper, and Shu Shaogu, "Language and Revolution: Formulae of the Cultural Revolution." *Language in Society* 19, no. 1 (1990): 61-79. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4168105.

formulae confirms Maoist China's rapid semantic change. For example, in the pre-revolution period, the word for "study" was used for the activity of acquiring knowledge, either practical or theoretical. But after the revolution it was used for learning Marxist ideas, and then it was solely used for attending Public Criticism Meetings, where people shared their ideas and received criticism from other attendees. Another example is "ci zhi geming jingli!", meaning "here extend revolutionary salute!" This formula derives from the old formula, "ci zhi jing li" meaning "here extend my ~~solute~~ salute" or "with the highest respect," a greeting formula used by prerevolutionary educated people in writing letters. The insertion of the constituent "geming," meaning revolution, effects the change. This insertion is very important because it shows the change in the semantic participants with respect to age and social status: the old formula was used when addressing a person of higher social status or more advanced age. After the revolution, by contrast, one's political identity and class status became more significant; participants were restricted to the proletariat and the revolutionaries. However, after the revolution, the formula reverted to its function in pre-revolutionary times. Although the revolution was carried out by workers, peasants, and children who would be semi-literate at best, written Chinese was also exploited and shaped for revolutionary purposes. Red Guards, who were literate, made use of Big Character Posters as the most popular pervasive way to criticize their teachers, whom they labeled "petty bourgeoise." These posters adopted the old form of government announcements from the Qing Dynasty. In the Qing Dynasty, the government used Big Character Posters as one of the official forms to proclaim any important information. These posters were hung at the most obvious location of the city (often the outside of the city wall), to notify the residents of a crime, a policy change or anything

deemed significant by the local government. A more obvious example would be the ubiquitous red hanging scroll with big yellow characters. In pre-revolutionary times, this form was used for celebrations, especially for weddings or Spring Festivals because yellow was the imperial color and red was an auspicious color symbolizing good wishes. Revolutionary propaganda adopted this form's striking visual effects from the combination of red and yellow. Four-character utterances or idioms were designed to convey their messages simply and forcefully for mass consumption. Another work by Xu Bing titled *Art for the People* uses this form, but substitutes four of his invented characters. The piece might be a mockery of the semantic change effected by the language of revolutionary propaganda. In general during the Cultural Revolution, slogans were changing almost twice a month. The fast pace of change in the revolutionary language gave many words new meanings but rendered many others meaningless. People were lost in the language itself. The Second Round of Chinese Character Simplification following the Revolution simplified many characters with the intention of improving the literacy rate in the country, but this revolution of the written language eventually failed. The main reason for this was that the simplifications were mostly arbitrary, without any historical basis or logical thinking; many characters became "over-simplified" and unrecognizable.

Interestingly, many old generations still recognize or sporadically use some of the "over-simplified" characters that younger generations cannot make sense of, but this is just the generation gap that straddles the revolution. I am unsure if Xu's work references the simplification movement, but he undoubtedly was part of that cultural experiment, consciously or unconsciously. It is clear that constant semantic change or linguistic upheaval

during the Cultural Revolution more generally is one convincing way to interpret Xu' s invented characters: they are a satirical representation of "being lost in words" due to the changing nature of the revolutionary language. In this case, Xu's works forms an answer to the two questions by stating Chinese is a malleable container of constant semantic changes or more accurately, political changes.

Nevertheless it would be too narrow-minded to overtly politicize Xu' s work while ignoring other underlying messages. It is helpful to review the original question again: What is Chinese? Is Chinese just political and revolutionary language? I am also attracted to the possibility that Xu references the linguistic history of Chinese itself.

Language, as one form of culture, is a sediment of a long history — most languages derived from hieroglyphic forms. Chinese, along with a few others, still preserves this hieroglyphic origin. In the development of Chinese language, although some character components became subject to phonetic functions and formed a new character with similar pronunciation, most characters still preserve some vestige of highly abstracted representations of their referents. In this sense, each character is an abstract painting itself as were noticed by early modern European painters. However, the meaning of each character is defined by a fixed composition of different components. A likely methodology of Xu's character-making might be based on changing a meaningful character's component composition, or more specifically, reorganizing the components. Analogically, when you change the order of a set, the set is still the same set, but if a character were to be imagined as a set composed of different components, the same rationale would fail because linguistically elements' order matters.

Simple as Xu's trick might seem, it is based on the schematic nature of Chinese characters, and this quality is an crucial heredity from the long linguistic history of Chinese language. In fact, the thoughtful architectural arrangement of the exhibition space ingeniously exteriorizes the internal architectural beauty of Chinese characters themselves. By W.J.T Mitchell's concept of "image-text,"[3] the Chinese language, especially in Daoist art, tends to stress the interlocking relationship between textual elements and graphic elements.[4] This might relate to the quasi-iconographic nature of the character construction itself.

Another point from Chinese linguistic history might also play a role in Xu's work. As I mentioned, Chinese is a group of often mutually unintelligible related languages or dialects. Nevertheless, all these dialect users share one written system. More specifically, they all recognize the vocabulary and the construction formula of Chinese characters, which non-Chinese speakers might characterize as "a bunch of strokes ordered in a very Chinese way." This formula was so prevalent, influential and politically powerful that many minority ethnicities endeavored to establish the writing systems of their native languages, usually not sinological, by adopting and later adjusting this formula. The Tangut people, who ruled Northwest China as the Xi Xia Dynasty (1038 to 1227), formed their written language in this way, but it went extinct by the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644). Another ethnic minority group, the lu-Mien people, also established the written system of their native

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[3] WIESENTHAL, CHRISTINE, BRAD BUCKNELL, and W. J. T. Mitchell, "Essays into the Imagetext: An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 33, no. 2 (2000): 1-23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029680.

[4] Huang, Shih-shan, *Picturing the True Form.* 2015

language (part of the Mien-Hmong language family, but not Sino-Tibetan language family) by imitating the constructional rules for the clerical Chinese script. For political concerns, Chinese government banned the official use of this written form during the Ming Dynasty but the conception of it is sufficient enough to prove the existence of Chinese-like languages that are not Chinese at all although the construction formulas might be highly derivative. Specifically, these non-Chinese languages differ in grammatical rules, vocabularies and many other aspects. Many of these languages look familiar and uncanny for the premodern Chinese audience and they look even more confounding and mysterious to the contemporary audience considering their current status being long extinct. Conceptually and formally, they could be one of the precedents for Xu's "characters."

As a curious and important fruit grown from the long development of Chinese linguistic history, Chinese calligraphy might also be an inspirational source for Xu's work. Conventionally, hanging scrolls are the main medium for making and displaying Chinese calligraphy. However, Xu chooses to apply the clerical-script-like "characters," to the curious medium of woodblock prints, and sometimes hanging scrolls. Looking overtly organized and archaic, clerical script rarely appeared in traditional Chinese calligraphy but only in the engravings of scholarly or official stamps to stamp onto finished paintings and calligraphies. Traditional Chinese scholars/officials always attached a symbolic meaning of ancient knowledge and anti-calligraphy quality to clerical scripts. In their minds, the clerical scripts are almost solely associated with the auxiliary function of stamps but not the aesthetic function of calligraphy. Among the huge family or Chinese scripts and fonts, usually only the cursive script, the running script, and sometimes the regular script are favored by the

scholarly aesthetics for their spontaneity, variation, and rhythmic energy. The crown of calligraphy, always associated with the literati class, usually goes to the most spontaneous and non-professional-looking, sometimes even with a sense of naivete. By this standard, the wood-printed characters which represents otherwise professional craftsmanship and rigid order would be deemed tunfitting for calligraphic appreciation. However, the regulated form and constructional rigor of this "lowest" from is borrowed for other scripts and proved surprisingly valuable for the application of the type printing technique, with the development of which the woodblock prints later became the most popular and affordable form of information among the semi-literate commoners. Interestingly, Xu marries the vernacular tone of wood block print as a calligraphic or art form to the elite association of the the hanging scroll as a medium. It is a dialectical interplay between the contradictory elements, which might never intersect in ordinary life. This interplay, made possible only in the world of art, instantly speaks to the aesthetics of Surrealism.

The concept of "the marvelous" is critical for Surrealist aesthetics and its idea of a new relation to self and world based on a rejection of reason and rationality as first principles. "The Marvelous," an essential concept for Surrealist artists, is defined as exacerbated and anxious beauty by Andre Breton. Xu takes up this Surrealist heredity as he hides a surprise by juxtaposing the two terms that appear to conflict but are secretly related. In Xu's "character," the independent meaning of a character's components contradict the meaningless nature of the character as a whole. In Xu's historical concept, the high-born hanging scrolls contradicts the mass-produced wood block prints. Along the axis of Surrealist rationale, the work should provoke an underlying anxiety in the viewer by subverting the viewer's unconscious

understanding of Chinese characters to incite a feeling of "the uncanny" and "strangeness." This anxiety is further complicated by the linguistic and historical complexities of the Chinese language.

With the analysis above, I'm at pains to avoid invoking an artistic strategy that, at this point, borders on cliché: language and art have gone hand in hand for a long time. Language and art have coexisted in western art since classical times, but it was not until the first conceptual art movement, Dada that language legitimately began to merge into art itself. Jean-Louis David's painting, *The Death of Marat* uses the inscription "To Marat, David," as a personal salute or homage to the martyr. In this way, language complements art because the text points out David's personal admiration thus signaling the artist's personal engagement thus elevating the artwork if the revolutionary sentiment were to be positive. While in Pablo Picasso's paintings, he often uses text as a pun to add another layer of depth by activating the referential function of modern language. Language serves a similar function in *Marcel Duchamp*'s works, especially *L.H.O.O.Q* and *the Fountain*. The effect of language on the interpretations of the two works mentioned above is always cultural and linguistic. For example, *L.H.O.O.Q* is a pun. The letters pronounced in French sound like "Elle a chaud au cul," meaning "she has a hot ass." In French culture, "Elle a chaud au cul" is a vulgar expression implying that a woman has sexual restlessness. This underlying message, combined with the moustache detail, and the fact that the painting does not show the lower part of Mona Lisa, really bring out the radical and playful nature of this work, an intriguing appropriation of one of the best-known images, by subverting the sublimity of the Renaissance iconography. In the case of *Fountain*, Marcel Duchamp signed the work with "R.

Mutt," which he later explained as "Richard Mutt." This play on words capitalizes the French

association of "Richard" with a wealthy person, the German association of "Mutt" with

poverty and the popularity of a cartoon figure at the time sharing the name "Mutt." The use of

language made *Fountain* an irony on the nature of the Society of Independent Artist but also a

trigger for the question on the definition of art. To this point, language functioned to

complement art, but language had not become a central concern for most artists. In Futurist

poems, *Zang Tumb Tuub: Adrianople, October 1912*, for example, art began to deconstruct

language itself, leaving only its phonetic aspect. Then Dadaist poetry, pioneered by Hugo

Ball, overthrew the functional aspect once and for all by "breaking up and destroying

language structures," and thus "their poetic formulation expunged language from its utilitarian

purpose where word combinations turn into sonorous conjurations."[5] Following the Dada

Movement, Language played a central role in surrealist paintings, especially those of René

Magritte. Magritte was demonstrating a proposition from an essay titled *Words and Images* that

he wrote in 1929: "*Everything tends to suggest that there is little connection between an object

and what represents it*." This statement was a product of Magritte's interest in the writings of the

philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who stressed the arbitrary nature of the relationship between

words and the objects they name. In Pop art, the role of language was fundamental to the work.

The language use in Andy Warhol's paintings is a key element to the integrity of the work: the

industrially designed labels on popular commercial products echoed the silk print technique and

the intentional replicas, while the bold and simple text of comic strip characters are essential to

their identity as the building blocks of a complete narrative with an acerbic tone. Language is a

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[5] Martinique, Elena, *Stumbling Across Dada Poetry*, "WIDEWALLS," last modified December 23, 2016, https://www.widewalls.ch/dada-poetry/

basic concern of Pop art.[6] Throughout the development of conceptual art, we can see an

increasing focus on language as art. This trend is crucial because it is indispensable to the

question of art's identity famously invoked by Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. Marcel sent this

work to the annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists (SIA), which claimed that

any work could enter this exhibition if the artist payed a six-dollar membership fee. To play with

the admission rule of the exhibition, Marcel used a pseudo-name R. Mutt to make a satirical

statement on the modern art scene and the artistic circle. He challenged the traditional definition

of art by trying to exhibit an upside-down urinal as artwork. By trying to exhibit a mass-

produced functional merchandise object, also a private and vulgar tool, Duchamp subverted what

considered art to be seen. By modifying and arranging a non-art object by his own choices, he

transformed the non-art into a thought-provoking artwork, which overthrew the traditional

concept of art making. However, *Fountain* needs the audience to complete the final stage of art

becoming art because Duchamp had predicated the audience's reaction by presuming the

audience's cultural background, in *Fountain*'s case, the audience's familiarity with the cultural

symbols used. Art became a Midas Touch not by the master's paint brush, but by the audience's

cultural engagement. In the case of Xu's work, the Midas Touch is the audience's linguistic

engagement with the work. The condition for language to be art is the completion of the artwork

in the mind of the audience. Dada, Surrealism, Pop Art and Xu's work itself gain aesthetic

(artistic) potency exactly because they resist semantic translation while requesting linguistic

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[6] Galenson, David, *LANGUAGE IN VISUAL ART: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*. https://www.nber.org/papers/w13845.pdf

interpretation. In those cases, the art happens when the language ceases to function as language. From the other side, the case could be made that every work of art – language-based or not – completes itself in the mind of its audience. For example, 20th century American abstraction, for instance, is itself a sort of shaggy insular language. The overarching point could be made that every work of art exists on a spectrum between sensory experience and conceptual interpretation. Written historical languages, which are admittedly more abstract than many other forms of representation, however, are qualitatively different as bearers of content. In the case of Chinese, each character was invented thousands of years ago based on the abstracted pictorial form of the object the character referred to. Nevertheless, Chinese users did not think of the characters as such because the characters were gradually standardized, iconized and codified as the written system of Chinese developed based on further abstractions of the original pictorial form of each character. It is imaginable that Chinese characters are the earliest version of abstraction art. Simultaneously, as Chinese characters walked farther and farther away from their pictorial origin, the written Chinese became less direct as information conveyors because they require a decodifying capacity of based on the reader's prior knowledge. Pictures, by contrast, are more direct because they rely on retinal effects to send a message. Maybe different colors and shapes have different associations in different cultures, it is undeniable that no matter what effects colors and shapes can eventually have on the viewer, they do have a direct influence on the physical and mental state of the viewer. This influence happens almost immediately with no need for intermediates. However, language, though less direct, can act like highly condensed cultural bombs, like landmines of information, when inlaid with more direct pictorial language. In Xu's case, the trigger is the cultural eye of the audience and the explosion happens between the

sensory experience and conceptual interpretation. For example, someone who has no prior knowledge of written Chinese will assume Xu's work to be a three-dimensional display of Chinese calligraphy. A Chinese reader knows that a non-Chinese reader doesn't is that the language isn't standard Chinese. In this sense, they know that they don't know anything just like when Socrates said he was the wisest man in Athens, whereas a non-Chinese reader doesn't know that they don't know anything. Is it also possible that this work is not meaningless? If Xu's script conforms to linguistic rules known only to Xu, then Chinese readers and non-Chinese readers are arguably in identical positions, except that this one-person script looks slightly more like Chinese characters than it does like the Roman alphabet. Xu can be tweaking non-Chinese audiences for fetishizing an aspect of Chinese culture, or he might be giving Chinese audiences a sense of inclusion that is ultimately worthless. We might neve know. Perhaps this piece works best as a Tower of Babel, a heavenly punishment that annihilates meaning and divides people amongst themselves, although this might also sound like a overreading of Xu's work (Overreading in art is never a crime!).

Many art historians might despise Xu's work as a long overdue imitation of western language art. It would not be difficult for a graduate art student to do a project titled "Language Art Challenge." It is a qualified critique and I agree that Xu'work is not completely revolutionary. However, to some Chinese art historians, the exciting part might hardly be the application of known artistic rules or the appropriation of Chinese linguistic history, but the subject of the application and the goal of appropriation. With the two questions already asked, "What is Chinese?" and "What is language?" it is time for to ask the third question, "Why are we asking?" If a Chinese viewer were standing in front of a wall of "Chinese characters," her or she

might ask the first two questions as an outward quest into his/her mother culture using his/her cultural identity as a confident passport, but the third question might conflict many as an inward self-quest into today's Chinese language and Chinese culture through a highly personal perspective.

The title of the work is *Book from the Sky*. In traditional Confucian mythologies, a book from the sky always means an undecipherable message from the heaven, the overseeing all-mighty god to comment on the past and warn about the future. Xu's message might have proposed a question unanswerable by nature, but it always leads to next and more questions. These following questions might be the ones we should really try to answer as an increasingly open community of Chinese identities.

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