A “Ghost Rebellion”: Notes on Xu Bing’s “Nonsense Writing” and Other Works

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Xu Bing’s Tian shu is well-known to the English-speaking world as A Book from the Sky. This translation of the artwork’s title fails to convey the nuance of the Chinese phrase. Although tian shu occasionally refers to the mysterious divine canon of a religious sect, in colloquial Chinese it means abstruse or illegible writing that makes no sense to its reader. It would thus be more appropriate to call Xu’s composition of fake characters Nonsense Writing. More than a simple change in wording, this alternative translation illuminates an interpretation of the work, because it is the result of a particular audience’s response: the title Tian shu was not invented by the artist, but was given by onlookers who were confused by the work’s seeming illegibility. As Xu Bing has remarked on various occasions, including the interview published in the Winter 1993 issue of Public Culture (p. 324), his composition is a piece of “nonsense writing” (i.e., tian shu) only to people who cannot penetrate its meaning; his own title for the work was Xishi jian or A Mirror That Analyzes the World. As a “mirror,” it reflects while reversing this world; as a piece of “nonsense writing,” it deconstructs and reconstructs what makes this world legible, conceivable, and therefore meaningful. This reversal does not destroy meaning, however. It only destroys the signified (i.e., content), not the signifier (i.e., form). Nonsense Writing is never “no-sense.”

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Discussions of Xu Bing's *Nonsense Writing* abound. The most revealing comment seems to have come not from sympathetic reviewers but from a bitter official critique, which appeared in a Beijing newspaper two days before the first anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. The author, said to be an agent of the Ministry of Culture, condemned Xu's printed pages and scrolls, which covered the exhibition hall, as *gui da qiang*, a folk idiom meaning a wall (*qiang*) built (*da*) by a ghost (*gui*) to encircle a night traveler. No matter how fast the traveler runs, he is actually going in circles within the wall's invisible confines. Ironically, for Xu Bing this analogy had a more direct and literal reference: since 1987 he had been experimenting with making rubbings from the Great Wall, and he was working on a scaffold built for that purpose the day the official critique was published. Now this ongoing art project gained new significance. Because this project aimed to (re)construct the Great Wall with ink-rubbings, it could be called "*da qiang*" (to build a wall). Alternatively, since the character *da* also means "to beat" or "to pound," the act of making those rubbings, by repeatedly pounding an ink pad over a sheet of paper held on the Wall, could be described as "*da qiang*" (to pound a wall). Such a realization inspired Xu Bing to entitle this project *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (*Gui Da Qiang*). With a crew of students and peasants, he labored for twenty-four days to make prints from a thirty-meters-long section of the famous Wall. The project was planned and conceived as a grand "art happening"; as Xu put it, "I hope to experience the process of expending great effort for a 'meaningless' result." Every stage of this process was meticulously documented, including the endless, monotonous sound and motion of "pounding the wall," which was recorded on film and video. The crew members wore special uniforms printed with characters from the earlier *Nonsense Writing*, suggesting the intertextuality of the two projects and completing the allusion to *gui da qiang* (see fig. 1).

*Nonsense Writing* (or its components) now functioned as a metaphor, identifying the artist as a "ghost" (*gui*) who was "pounding the wall" (*da qiang*). No longer empty signifiers, the unreadable characters covering the uniform were now literally *embodied*.

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for a specific type of beauty or a more abstract aesthetic goal. Their distortion
then emerges from the lamentation of a profound loss; others realize the longing
shadowy figures have been invented as modes of human expression. Some of
I, Z. is fascinated with ghosts in Chinese literature, and tells me that many such

(3) of Xu Bing.
Ceramic Wall (Puhuo court)

Figure 1: Pounding the

A "Ghost Rebellion"
and reversal of this world are a consequence of the human desire for representa-
tion. 2 Ghosts can be romantic or comic; but I believe that Xu Bing’s “ghost” is of
the tragic type. Half a year after staging Ghosts Pounding the Wall, he related
his earlier Nonsense Writing to a famous ghost story told in a text from the second
century B.C.E. It is said that in antiquity when the sage Cang Jie invented writing,
“all the ghosts wailed in the night.” Later commentators have speculated on the
reason for the ghosts’ cries. Some attribute the ghosts’ anguish to their loss of
control over the universe’s secret; others find the source for the ghosts’ agony
in their anticipation of the numerous lies that Cang Jie’s invention would facilitate.
Both readings are interesting; but to me the story’s power always resides in a
single image: the ghosts wailing in the darkness. They wailed because they had
no words; they cried in the night because they had lost their share of the day.

Xu Bing’s own words demonstrate his emotional affinity with the wailing
ghosts: “Ever since human beings created those picture-like yet non-pictorial
words, they began a process during which they have become increasingly com-
plex, increasingly exhausted, and increasingly perplexed by their own writings.”
It is this understanding that led him to “expose and criticize Cang Jie’s towering
crimes” and to destroy the Chinese writing system in his Mirror That Analyzes
the World. This “ghost rebellion,” however, could only reach a tragic end because
it would invoke more “meaningless words.” (In Xu Bing’s view, these would
include the words I am now writing; as he has stated, “I never thought that [my
Nonsense Writing] would also get entangled within [this literary process], making
a quite simple point chaotic, obscure, and troublesome.”) 3

interpreters of Nonsense Writing often immediately place it in some overarching
social, political, or cultural context, with the hope that this will disclose the
work’s unstated intention and meaning. The work is frequently held up as a
definitive example of the 1985 Fine Arts New Wave (85 Meishu Xinchao), or
even as a primary symbol of the broad liberalization movement that characterized

2. Judith Zeitlin has discussed these ideas in her paper, “Embodying the Disembodied: Representa-
tions of Ghosts and the Feminine in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature,” which she delivered
at the conference “Women and Literature in Ming-Qing China” (Yale, June 1993) and will publish
in the conference volume. She inspired me to note the frequent references to “ghosts” in Xu Bing’s
works.

3. These quotations from Xu Bing’s original manuscript are not included in the published paper,
ettitled “Analyzing and Experiencing – A Letter to Qi Li,” in Lion Fine Arts (Xiongshi meishu) 242
the years prior to the Tiananmen massacre. Given such a status, its message is understood as a direct attack on China’s political authority as well as its literary legacy. A different view, which Charles Stone suggests in his letter published in this issue, relates Nonsense Writing to an even broader tradition of Chinese arts and aesthetics. We are encouraged to see traces of continuity between Xu Bing’s work and ancient art forms such as “wild grass” calligraphy. Both views may find support from Xu Bing’s own statements. While hoping “to expose and criticize” Cang Jie’s crimes, he also claimed: “I am after a Classical goal.” This and other contradictions in Xu Bing’s writings suggest a complex mind and personality. They reject a straightforward reading and a general contextualization of his work, but invite us to consider some more specific or intimate factors—his family, life, education, ideas, etc.—that could have influenced and even conditioned his way of thinking.

For example, we may reflect upon his response to the official criticism of June 2, 1990—What could the analogy of “ghosts pounding (or building) the wall” have invoked in his mind? It is hard to imagine that his martyr-like adoption of the idiom as the title of his last project in China didn’t reflect his personal experience in Chinese politics. “Ghost” is a political term in contemporary China; in particular, it was a common label for “counterrevolutionaries” during the Cultural Revolution. Once declared an “ox-ghost and snake-demon” (niu gui she shen), a person became an outcast from the “bright, confident people”; his identity as a political alien and a creature of darkness became public knowledge. Growing up in an intellectual family on the campus of Beijing University, Xu Bing had witnessed the repeated exercises of such persecution. He knew too well its language, logic, and victims. When his turn seemed to have finally arrived (the newspaper article condemned him as a representative of “anti-art,” “anti-traditional,” “anti-intellectual,” and “anti-social” tendencies), he voluntarily named himself a “ghost” and went to “pound the wall.” In 1990 this response was ironic; in 1970 it would have been heroic.

“Ghosts” are antithetical. Xu Bing’s “ghost rebellion” has produced countermonuments. The Great Wall—a prime symbol of China’s national identity and political unification—has been turned into a “paper wall” (see fig. 2). The country’s four-thousand-year literary tradition finds its mirror image in Nonsense Writing. I call these works countermonuments (not “anti-monuments”) because (1) their violation of traditional monumentality must be measured against traditional monuments, (2) this violation has resulted in new monumental forms exhibited in huge
installations, and (3) the Chinese cultural tradition supplies the means to enact this violation. These means—rubbing-making, woodblock carving, and book printing—mimic the formative process of Chinese culture, and in Xu Bing’s art become the primary sites of meaning. When Xu Bing talks about his works, he belittles the significance of the final product and emphasizes the importance of its production. He reflected upon his *Nonsense Writing* after its first exhibition:
"The sense of the sublime arises from the deliberate effort to reach a meaningless goal." (We should also recall his self-avowed purpose with *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*: "I hope to experience the process of expending great effort for a 'meaningless' result.") To realize this idea, the "effort" must be exaggerated and artistic creation is equated with an ascetic practice. In contrast to the "crazy draft" calligraphy of the ancient masters (mentioned in Mr. Stone's essay as a possible prototype for Xu Bing's *Nonsense Writing*), his art must conceal any trace of spontaneity and inspiration; it must take the form of a single motion endlessly repeated—carving thousands of fake characters, or pounding the Great Wall a million times. *Nonsense Writing* is thus "more than casual and playful marks on paper, more than a wry conceptual joke, and more than a jest at the expense of tradition and elders." In fact, one may even argue that this work's fame stems not from its ideology or visual presentation but from the amount of "effort." This is why it is still a "monument," which always absorbs and "squanders" a prodigious amount of human labor. This is why some more spontaneous "nonsense writing" from the same art movement (by Wu Shanzhuan and Gu Wenda) has attracted less attention. And this is also why in the interview published earlier in this journal, the first question was: "You worked on this (i.e. *Nonsense Writing*) for a long time, didn't you?" And the artist duly answered: "Yes, four years, from 1987 to 1991."

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A final note: Mr. Stone has identified, quite admirably, two characters from a page of Xu Bing's *Nonsense Writing* as "real characters" listed in a Chinese dictionary. I have found, however, that one of them (Morohashi no. 7061) was an "historical forgery": Wuzong of the Tang dynasty (9th century) created this graph without providing meaning or pronunciation. In a sense, therefore, Xu Bing's character becomes a mirror within a mirror, or a ghost of a ghost. It has a past and is inventing a future: we are told by the artist that he has received fan-letters written in the script of his *Nonsense Writing*.

**Appendix**

Shortly after exhibiting his *Nonsense Writing* to the public, Xu Bing published a short article in which he reflected upon his work:


For more than a year I ceaselessly invented, carved, and printed a set of twelve volumes of *Nonsense Writing* which no one in this world can understand. The unbelievable amount of work threw its audience into confusion.

One of my painter friends once told me about a "crazy" guy in his home village, who always went out to collect waste paper at a certain hour, washing these papers in a river, carefully mounting them piece by piece, and then storing them under his bed after they had become dry and flat. I thought quite a long time about this person's behavior. Finally I realized that it was a kind of *qigong*—a kind of cultivation of the *Tao*. It was indeed a very powerful kind of *qigong*. [It exemplifies] an Eastern way of achieving true knowledge—obtaining sudden enlightenment and correspondence with Nature by endlessly experiencing a fixed point . . .

Nowadays the art world has become an arena. What do I want from it? Handing one's work to society is just like driving living animals into a slaughterhouse. The work no longer belongs to me; it has become the property of all the people who have touched it. It is now concrete and filthy. I hope to depart from it, looking for something different in a quiet place.

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