



# AN ANALYSIS OF CHINESE ARTIST XU BING'S CREATION; IN THE CONTEXT OF INFLUENCED BY CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

Shatrudhan Kumar Gupta  
PhD scholar  
Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University,  
Shanghai, China

**Abstract**— China is a rich country in art and culture, and art created by Chinese artists is deeply connected and rooted. Since ancient times, Chinese calligraphy has been a significant art form for expression, and several Chinese artists have been influenced by Chinese calligraphy. The well-known contemporary artist Xu Bing is one of the Chinese artists who is inspired and influenced by Chinese calligraphy. He has explored and experimented with Chinese calligraphy in his art practices and creations in several ways. His large-scale installation works have created a strong impact on the international art scenario and opened new perspectives to the viewers. The research paper analyzes and explores the veteran Chinese artist Xu Bing's creations which are deeply influenced by Chinese calligraphy.

**Keywords**— Artist, Artwork, Chinese Artist, Contemporary Art, Chinese Art, Calligraphy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culturally China is a rich and diverse country. Chinese art, crafts, and literature have a long history, deep-rooted and deeply connected since ancient times. Chinese art history encompasses all the visual arts originating in China and produced by Chinese creators and artists. Paintings, printmaking, and calligraphy were three of the most important and highest forms of Chinese artwork.

The modern art movement in China started in the early nineteenth century with artistic and creative explorations and the discovery of new art forms and techniques. The term modern art often refers to Western styles such as realism, expressionism, and later modernism. Chinese modern art is associated with an evaluation of artistic and creative expressions from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. During that time, Chinese artists began to experiment with various mediums and techniques inspired by Western styles, at the same time, they rediscovered Chinese traditional and classical arts and aesthetics in their creations. Chinese calligraphy has been an important influence on Chinese artists since ancient times, the techniques and conventions being reflected in the art creations. At the beginning of the twenty-

first century, several contemporary Chinese artists created outstanding artworks that were influenced by Chinese calligraphy, and Xu Bing was one of them. These artists made a deep impact on the international art world through their creations.

Xu Bing was born in Chongqing in 1955 (Chongqing; a city in southwest China), and he was raised in Beijing, China. In the year 1977, he was admitted and joined the Printmaking Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA)<sup>1</sup>, Beijing. He also completed his master's degree at the same fine arts academy (CAFA), and later he joined as a faculty there.

Xu Bing's career as an artist and art educator both are highly recognized and he has received several awards and achievements in China and abroad. Later, Xu Bing played an important role in becoming a vice president, professor, supervisor of the doctoral program, and head of the institution's academic committee. He has been a member of the 'Chinese Printmakers Association' since 1981 and a member of the 'Chinese Artists Association' since 1982.

Besides being a successful academic personality, Xu Bing is a pure artist and continues his artistic practice. His works have been exhibited and displayed in several prestigious and important exhibitions around the world. His works are created with several mediums and materials, and he explores a lot through various techniques and mediums. He experimented with Chinese characters in his artworks.

Xu Bing is one of the earliest contemporary Chinese artists who gained recognition overseas and remains internationally influential until now. His works are strongly inspired by Chinese characters and calligraphy, he is fascinated with visual and written languages, and one can see this fusion in his several works. He lives and works between Beijing, China, and New York, USA.

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<sup>1</sup> Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA); is one of the best art institutes in China for contemporary art study and practice. It was founded in 1918 in Beijing. CAFA is the only institution of higher education for fine arts under the administration of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. ([www.cafa.edu.cn](http://www.cafa.edu.cn)).

## II. XU BING'S CREATIONS

Xu Bing is one of the Chinese artists who is widely well-known for his massive creations and art installations. He used various materials for his expression that reflected in his artworks, and his works are deeply connected with his roots. His works are profoundly influenced by the Chinese calligraphy. Xu Bing says, "Chinese literati have always been proud of their artistry combining poetry, calligraphy, and painting as a whole. The result of my attempt is to turn these elements into one thing. You can say that they are calligraphy, you can say that they are painting, and you can say that they are a piece of essay". The research study examines and analyzes Xu Bing's artworks that are deeply influenced by Chinese calligraphy, and these works have been created between 1987 to 2022.

### III. BOOK FROM THE SKY (1987-91)

The work *Book from the Sky* is a massive installation of hundreds of volumes and scrolls printed with four thousand (4000) imagined Chinese characters (close to the number of traditional Chinese characters) which are cut by hand into wood-printed blocks. This installation was first displayed at the 'China Art Gallery' (now the National Art Museum of China) in Beijing, China, in 1988. This work is the synchronization of text and language which represents and raises the question of Chinese identity and its relationship to the written word. Artist Xu Bing believes that writing is the 'essence of culture'.

This spectacular installation symbolizes aspects of old and emerging China, where the medium and technique are traditionally Chinese, and the scale and intent of the work align with contemporary creative practice. In this work, Xu Bing has hand-carved more than four thousand moveable type printing blocks. This work consists of books and paper scrolls printed with a representation of calligraphic text. The books are made of off-white 'zangjing' paper (a sort of ancient Chinese paper that is used for printing classic text associated with book types such as philosophy, religion, and medicine) (Figure: 1; A, B).

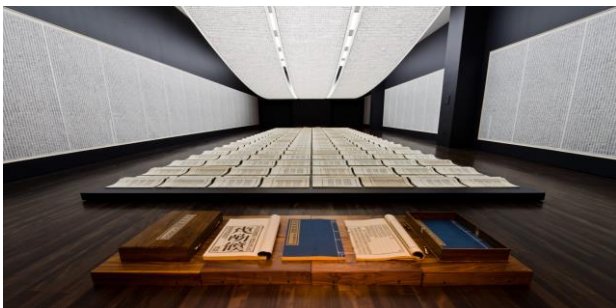


Figure: 1 (A); Title: *Book From The Sky*, Medium: Installation of Books and Scrolls Printed from the Carved Wood Types of Invented Characters, and Ink on Paper, Size: Variable Dimensions, Year: 1987-91 (Installation View at

Blanton

Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, 2016).



Figure: 1 (B); Title: *Book From The Sky*, Medium: Installation of Books and

Scrolls Printed from the Carved Wood Types of Invented Characters, and Ink on Paper, Size: Variable Dimensions, Year: 1987-91 (Installation View at Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, 2016).

### IV. THE SUZHOU LANDSCAPES (2003-13)

Xu Bing says and explains his work series titled 'The Suzhou Landscapes', "Based on four idyllic ink paintings from the Suzhou Museum's collection, which were painted by 17th-century artists with their imitation of previous hanging scrolls, I created this version of the classic landscapes, rendering landscape motifs such as mountain, water, tree and stone with corresponding Chinese characters. The large characters in red, written in forms that resemble ancient pictographs on oracle bones, illustrate the pictorial forms beneath. An inscription in 'Square Word Calligraphy', running across all four panels, describes the Chinese tradition of 'paper copying paper' and the process of making Suzhou Land Scripts". The work *The Suzhou Landscapes* is one of the iconic works of the artist and was created between 2003-13. The combination of Chinese characters, trees, and mountains recalls classical Chinese paintings and their aesthetical beauty. (Figure: 2; A, B).



Figure: 2 (A); Title: *The Suzhou Landscapes*, Medium: Lithograph Print in Two Colors from 35 Plates on Entrada Natural Rag Paper, Year: 2003-13.



Figure: 2 (B); Title: The Suzhou Landscapes, Medium: Lithograph Print in Two Colors from 35 Plates on Entrada Natural Rag Paper, Size: 220x87 cm x 4 Panels, Year: 2003-13.

### V. LANDSCAPES FROM THE HIMALAYAS (1999)

Xu Bing explains and describes the work titled ‘Landscapes From The Himalayas’, and he says “In 1999, I participated in the Himalaya Project which is organized by the ‘Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Finland’. This goes into ‘Thick of Life’, an event organized by the Western Contemporary Art Museum, which made me pick up my sketchbook again and start practicing sketching. These are truly sketches since they are paintings drawn in words. I sit on the mountain, facing the real mountain, and write down the mountain. At this moment, I am able to leave behind the discussion of styles and concepts in the history of calligraphy and painting, thus reaching the most essential and unique part of our culture”. (Figure: 3). This piece of work beautifully indicates the artist's skilfully creation at the same time artist enjoyed the momentum of the atmosphere while he was working, and reflects the relation between the spiritual and the real world. The form of perception, memory, or imagination could be tangible or intangible depending on artistic ability and presentation. Xu Bing's works incorporate his memories and experiences which one can easily see and feel.



Figure: 3; Title: Landscapes from the Himalayas, Medium: Ink on Paper, Year:

1999, (Artwork Collection: Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art<sup>2</sup>, Finland).

### VI. LIVING WORD (2001)

The work Living Word consists of mostly four hundred (400) calligraphic editions of the Chinese character ‘Niao (鸟)’ which means ‘Bird’, and these are carved on colored acrylic sheets. This work is placed on the floor in a glistening strip that rises from the floor into the air. The Chinese character representing ‘Niao’ subsequently departs from the tactile definition and flies around the installation area. The colorful, sparkling imagery of the installation provides it with a novelty, magical, and fairy-tale-like feeling. The work of art is candidly simple, engaging, and easy to understand but at another level guides the viewer into a sort of ‘cognitive space’ so that implication and relation between word, symbol, concept, and image can resonate. Xu Bing succeeded in linking verbal invention with images. (Figure: 4).

Xu Bing said, “In order to recognize the limitations of humankind, including in myself, I started the work with other living beings so that we could complete or satisfy our deficiency degeneration by means of their assistance”. Xu Bing made closeness evident by rendering the Chinese character for birds ‘Niao (鸟)’, based on less abstract ancient examples posed in this work.

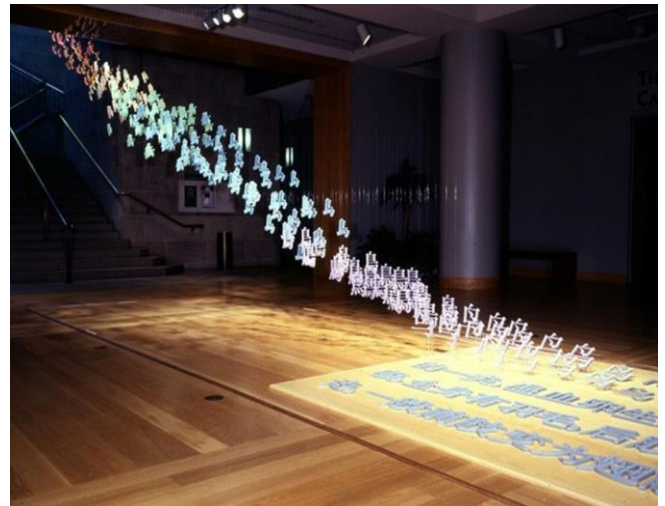


Figure: 4; Title: Living Word, Medium: Cut and Painted Acrylic, Year: 2001, (Exhibited: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C. USA, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art; The Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma is located in the centre of Helsinki, Finland.



### VII. GRAVITATIONAL ARENA (2021-22)

The artwork titled 'Gravitational Arena' is like a whirlpool of words. The huge exhibition hall (Museum of Art Pudong<sup>3</sup>, Shanghai, China), which is more than thirty meters high, from the first basement to the fourth floor, is composed of around one thousand six hundred (1600) metal square word calligraphy characters, with a visual depth of more than fifty meters, and falls freely from the top, forming a spiral inverted cone. Touching the ground, a row of tiled mirrors extends the scroll from above into an untouchable equidistant mirror, revealing a sense of grandeur.

If one stands at the bottom of the work, one can only see the text on the back and it is full of continuous stretching and overlapping, if one reads the mirror under one foot, the text itself can be verified, but it is still difficult to read from a distance. This incompleteness of content accompanies the entire visitor experience. On the first to third floors, one can see characters of different heights, sizes, and deformations from each observation deck, but one can always see only one corner. When one reaches the fourth floor, then can intuitively feel the feeling of the text pouring into the center due to gravity and falling infinitely downward. At this moment, every word that seems to occupy one place, as if falling is the only destiny, goes to the unknown, confused, and complex distance with the rhythm of space, world, and universe. (Figure: 5; A, B, C & D).

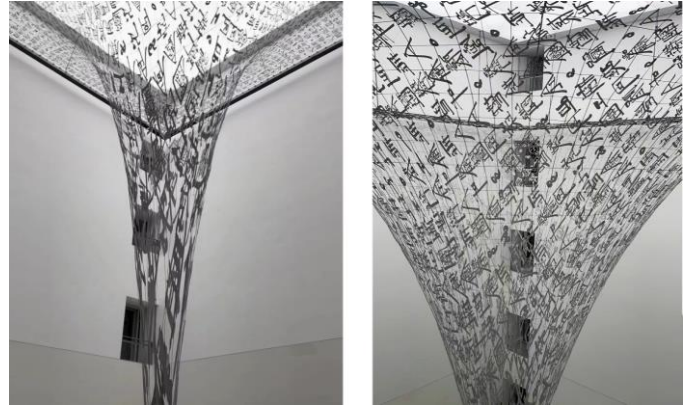


Figure: 5 (C, D); Title: Gravitational Arena, Medium: Mixed Media Installation, Size: 25.5x15.7x15.7 Meter, Year: 2021-22, (Displayed at Museum of Art Pudong, Shanghai, China, 2023).

### VIII. PHILOSOPHY BEHIND ARTWORKS

Xu Bing is fascinated with visual and written languages and one can see this fusion in his several works. "...The Himalayan Land Scripts indeed bear a striking compositional resemblance to the more straightforward woodcut Xu Bing made in 1980, as though returning the artist to the responses of his earlier self to the rural landscape. The two bodies of work are similar in both general subject matter and treatment of landscape details but differ radically in how the artist perceived and performed the process of creating a landscape painting...While a purely visual appreciation of the finished landscape is certainly possible, Landscripts are not fully understood until the viewer performs Xu Bing's creative process in his mind..." (Kuiyi Shen & Julia F. Andrews) (Figure: 6).

Xu Bing's works are reflections of the past to the present, he has excelled at indigenous forms from the past practice, but his true objective is to make the wisdom of history serve the present. The creations of Xu Bing are focused on the core task of conveying concepts and ideas, which consistently present inherent wisdom to the world.

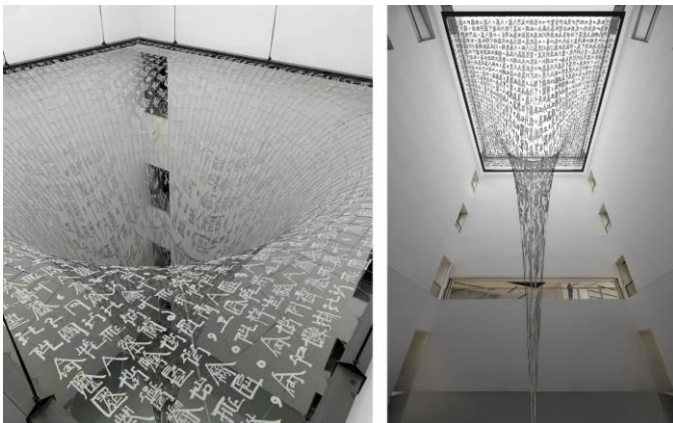


Figure: 5 (A, B); Title: Gravitational Arena, Medium: Mixed Media Installation, Size: 25.5x15.7x15.7 Meter, Year: 2021-22, (Displayed at Museum of Art Pudong, Shanghai, China, 2023).

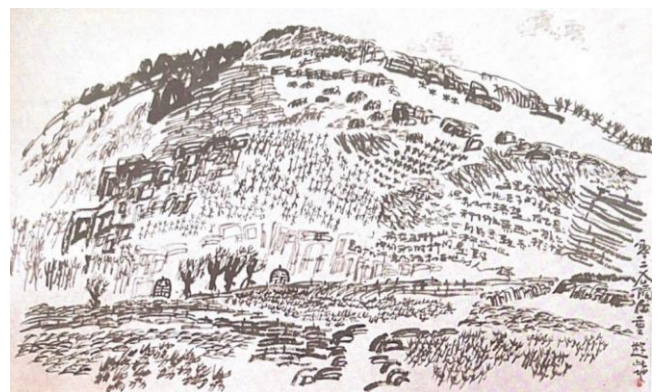


Figure: 6; Title: Landscript, Medium: Ink on Nepalese Paper, Size 99x172.5 cm, Year: 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Museum of Art Pudong (MAP); is a world-class contemporary art museum in Shanghai, China which opened for the public in the year 2021.



#### IX. CREATIVE PRACTICES AND PROCESS

Artist Xu Bing describes his art practices and says; “I treat it in a wild way, not in a fixed way. This is good, you can bring something special, something new into contemporary art. If you find a correct way to face your background and your tradition, maybe you can change that background in a good way”. The creative practices of Xu Bing are unique and authentic, how he amalgamated calligraphy in his process is amazing, and his works allow viewers to communicate in the larger context. Xu Bing’s innovative practices show his deep connection with his roots.

#### X. STYLE

The work style of Xu Bing is not particularly based on one medium, he uses and creates a powerful poignant mix of media, installations, and other mediums also. He keen interest in the relationship between meaning and words, writing, and reading. He is well known, particularly in printmaking and calligraphy for his large-scale works. The themes of his works allow him to access and perform while simultaneously exploring and experimenting. Xu Bing is particularly skilled in dealing with Chinese traditional elements in a contemporary way, and his strategies for introducing traditional Chinese elements are cleverly combined with the construction and deconstruction of basic cultural categories. He has developed a unique format of art connected to his position as an artist of the Chinese diaspora.

#### XI. CONCLUSION

Visual language is more powerful and impactful than any kind of medium of language, and it is deeply connected with the heart of human beings. The language of visuals is the deepest and strongest medium of understanding feelings, emotions, and the civilization of human beings from ancient times to till date, and coming future and future.

The research paper examines the contribution of Chinese artist Xu Bing’s creations to the present state of art and how effectively he contributes to taking cultural visions and aesthetics into account in his art practices. He amalgamates Chinese calligraphy into their creative practices and integrates

traditional techniques, motifs, and cultural narratives into their contemporary art processes. It also concisely and comprehensively summarizes the artist’s innovative practices and processes. The research study emphasizes the importance of aesthetics in contemporary art practices in China as well as its impact on visual narratives and experimental techniques, and it gives a new dimension to better understand the underlying cultural meaning and connotation of Chinese artist Xu Bing’s creations.

#### XII. REFERENCE

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#### IMAGE SOURCE

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