

**THE EXPRESSIVE FORMS OF XU BING'S NEO  
ENGLISH CALLIGRAPHY**

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## ABSTRACT

Xu Bing is active in the contemporary art world and a famous calligraphy artist and painter who held many individual art exhibitions in New York New Art Museum, Czech National Museum and other famous international art institutions. In 1999, he was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in recognition of his "significant contribution to society, particularly in printmaking and calligraphy". Xu Bing created a kind of new square character which combined English alphabets with Chinese calligraphy strokes and named it Neo English calligraphy. A series of Neo English calligraphy artwork was produced which theoretically influenced by the Chinese traditional philosophy and transformed into Chinese calligraphy which makes many experts, scholars and even the general public interested in its "value" and "innovation". This paper focuses on the expressive form of Neo English calligraphy and analyses its social impact.

Keywords: Neo English calligraphy, Xu Bing, Calligraphy Forms, Chinese Culture, Art Value.

## ABSTRAK

Xu Bing, seorang artis kaligrafi dan pelukis yang aktif dalam dunia seni kontemporer, mengadakan banyak pameran seni individu seperti di New York Seni Muzium, Muzium Kebangsaan Czech dan lain-lain institusi seni antarabangsa yang terkenal. Pada tahun 1999, beliau adalah penerima Persekutuan MacArthur sebagai pengiktirafan beliau terhadap "sumbangan beliau kepada masyarakat, khususnya dalam bidang seni cetak dan kaligrafi". Xu Bing mencipta sejenis muka taip baru bersegi empat yang menggabungkan huruf Inggeris dengan corak kaligrafi Cina dan ia menamakannya kaligrafi Neo Inggeris. Satu siri karya kaligrafi Inggeris telah dicipta di mana ia menarik minat pakar-pakar, para sarjana malah masyarakat umum dengan 'nilai' dan 'inovasinya'. Kertas ini memfokuskan kepada ekspresi rupa bentuk kaligrafi dan menganalisis kesannya terhadap social Justeru, penulisan ini diperluas dengan memasukkan karya seni yang lain bagi mendapatkan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang karya kaligrafi Neo Inggerisnya.

Kata kunci: Kaligrafi Bahasa Inggeris Baru, Xu Bing, Bentuk Kaligrafi, Budaya Cina, Nilai seni.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is a bold fusion of elements of Chinese characters and English characters, which has played a positive role in promoting the exchange of Chinese and Western cultural fields (especially in words). With the development of various content and art forms, people's aesthetic taste remains undeveloped. In view of the ever creeping globalization, contemporary art increasingly becomes sluggish and uncreative, thus entering a period of stagnation. The concept of art is the interpretation of the above elements. Firstly, attention to concept, serves to digest the imagination of contemporary art. Secondly, it can also promote the arts involved in society, so that art and society can form a virtuous circle. However, the impact of many factors, domestic and foreign debate on Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art is quite intense. Generally, the "debate" can be divided into two categories; the supporters considered Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy a kind of bold innovation, which realizes the fusion of traditional Chinese characters and symbols of western English elements. It has high application value and research value. As for opponents, they consider English calligraphy as being of "pseudo-Chinese characters"; almost no one can "read" it other than the writer himself. This is a humble flattery for the so-called cultural and creative art of the West. Perhaps, Xu Bing and his calligraphy art will continue to be controversial, but it is undeniable that his innovation is definitely a bold attempt, with real significance in the study of the forms of Neo English calligraphy. This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the research background. It is in order to enable the audience to further understand the basis of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy creation. And the creative ideas and components of Chinese calligraphy and English fonts are briefly explained. Then it briefly expounds the research questions, research design and so on launching a topic for the research of this paper.

## **1.1 Background of Study**

### **1.1.1 Introduction**

Due to Xu Bing's flexibility in the use of text, language and books, his impactful engraving and contemporary boast of a strong relationship between dialogue and communication. He was awarded "The Lifetime Achievement Award of Engraving Art" at the national association of engraving artists and was named one of the 16 most notable international artists by the "United States Art" magazine. We will mainly focus on his original Neo English calligraphy in this research. However we will expand this writing include his other artworks to help to understand his calligraphic works better.

Xu created the Neo English calligraphy by the connection of English alphabets and elements of Chinese Character. His Neo English calligraphy is popular in foreign countries. Foreigners not only favor it due to its thousands of year's history of Chinese calligraphy culture; they have come to recognize the underlying meaning of the calligraphy at the same time. The inherent meaning of the artworks is the key to Xu Bing's artworks. Through the influence of Chinese traditional culture and Chinese art culture, the general public especially the experts and scholars find it controversial to identify the true value of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy. Unfortunately, in-depth study of the forms of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy failed to uncover its value. In this paper, the expression of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy will be discussed and analyzed through the basis of summarizing the existing research results. This is an important reference value to guide the public, especially among the calligraphy art lovers, so they could acknowledge and feel the expression and influence of the world of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art. This section introduces the relationship between the five main types of Chinese calligraphy, English fonts, and the creation of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy.

### 1.1.2 The Introduction of Chinese Calligraphy

Chinese calligraphy is a part of Chinese traditional culture, with a representation of five thousand years of civilization. Chinese calligraphy exists in the form of traditional art culture. It is the soul of Chinese traditional culture. The culture in calligraphy reflects the excellent quality of the Chinese nation. From the ancient period of the Oracle bone script to seal (Figure 1.1) to the Clerical script (Figure 1.2), regular script (Figure 1.3), Chinese semi-cursive script (Figure 1.4) and running script (Figure 1.5) altogether reveal classic forms. Calligraphy has always boasts of a unique artistic charm.

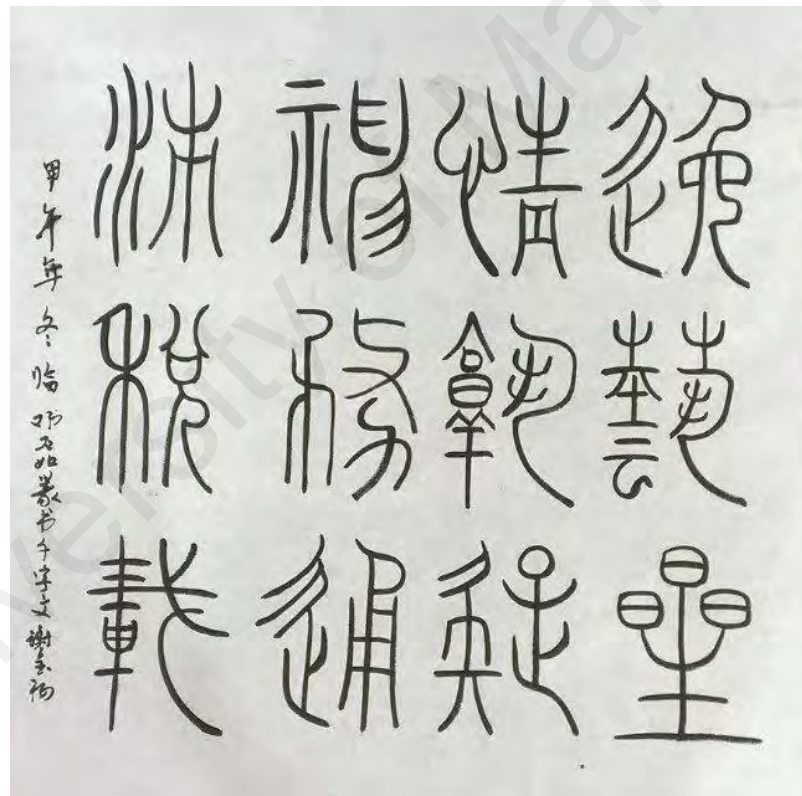


Figure 1.1 Oracle Bone Script

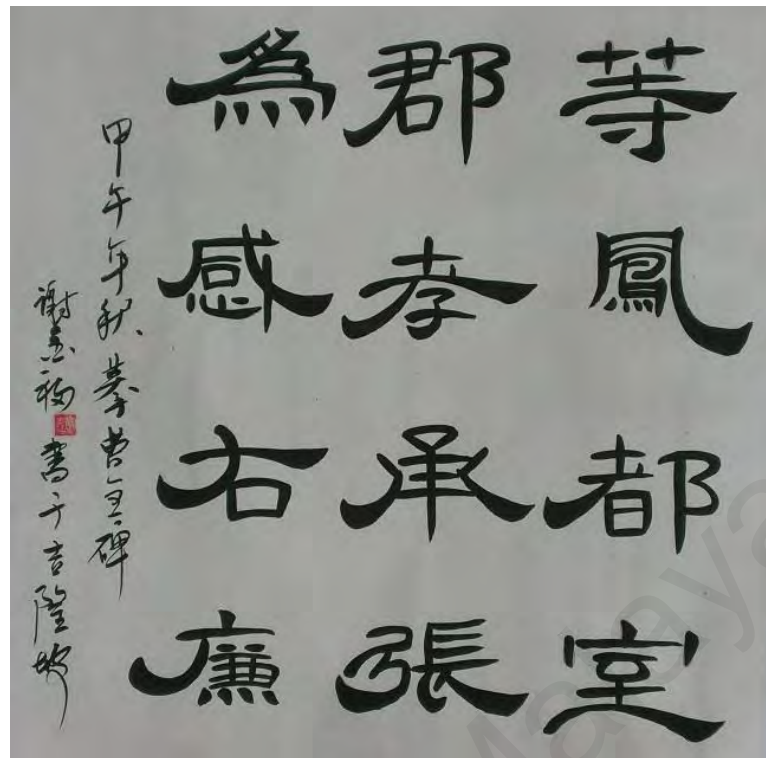


Figure 1.2 Clerical Script

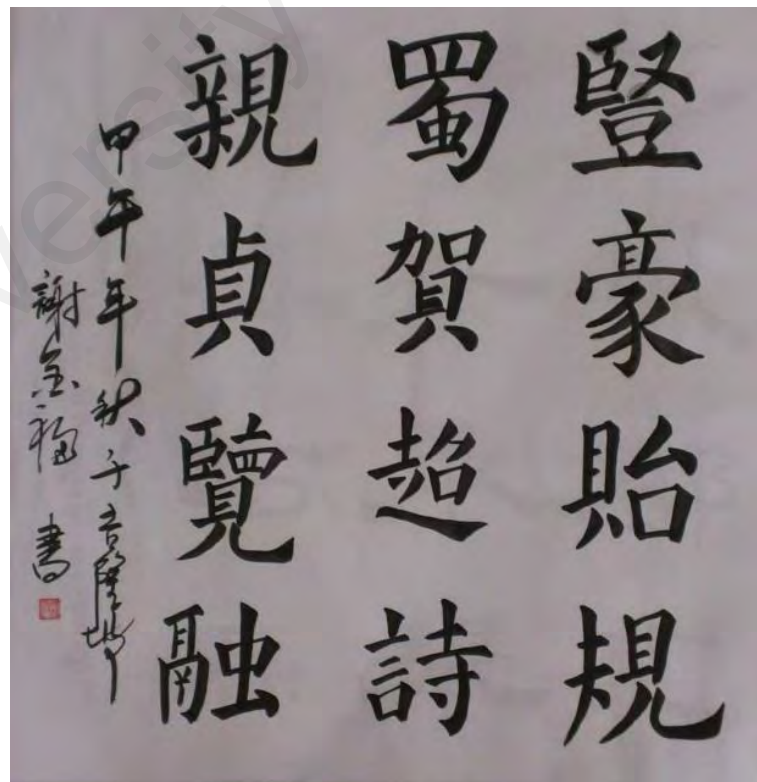


Figure 1.3 Regular Script



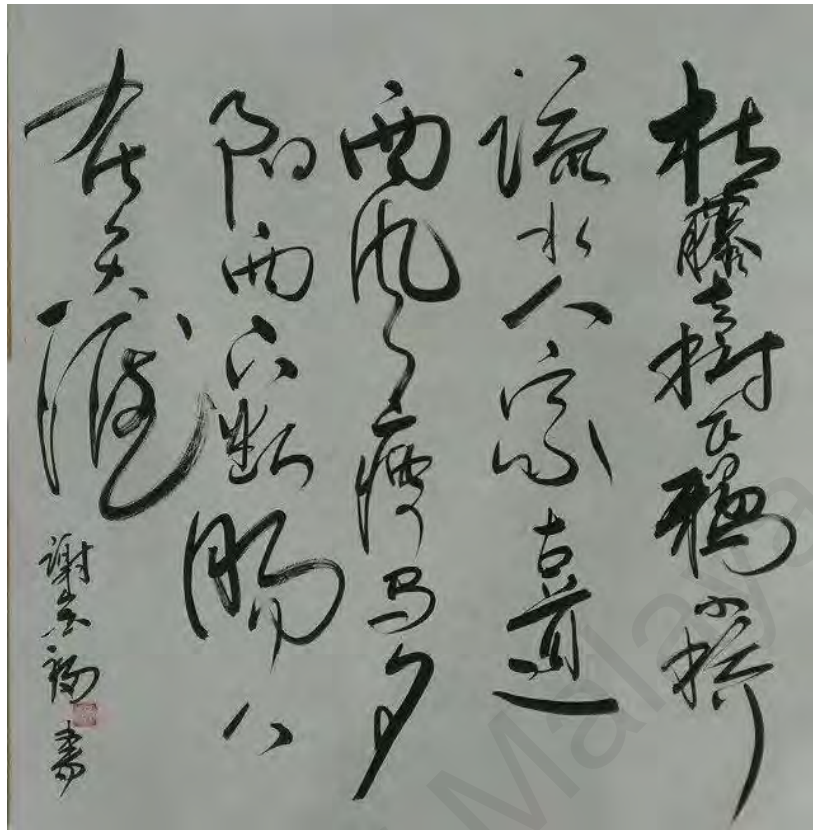


Figure 1.4 Semi-Cursive Script

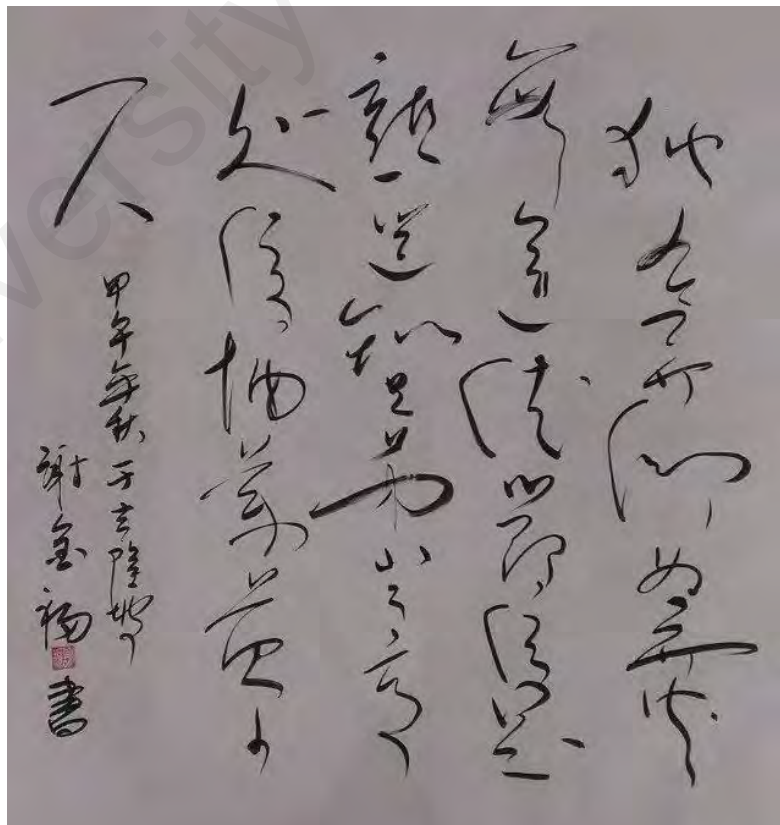


Figure 1.5 Running Script

Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is in the form of regular script, because this form is popular and easy to learn. It is very suitable for beginners to learn a font.

China is a country with profound and traditional culture, reflecting the long history and culture of China. Each period of calligraphy represents a different social style and humanistic qualities. Chinese traditional culture gave birth to Chinese calligraphy. Chinese calligraphy was also the cornerstone of traditional cultural heritage. Therefore, both of them complement each other. Xu Bing chose the form of Chinese calligraphy to create Neo English calligraphy; it is reflect the development of Chinese traditional culture and the 5,000-year history of civilization of the Chinese nation.

### **1.1.3 Xu Bing's Writing Ideas in the Neo English Calligraphy**

Art comes from life. It is one of the main sources of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy creation ideas and inspiration. There are many kinds of international art concepts, schools, styles, and concepts of contemporary art, but these can only be said to be an element in the creation of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy. Art originated from life is the weapon of Xu Bing's creation of Neo English calligraphy. Art originated from life. This is an attitude of art. It is also Xu Bing's first established art view.

### **1.1.4 Background Summary**

This section mainly introduces the research background of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art, Chinese calligraphy and English calligraphy. Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy creation of thoughts and elements highlights the artistic value and cultural value of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy. It also introduced the common typeface art of English calligraphy, which has a positive effect on our study of the expression of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy.

## 1.2 Statement of Problem

Xu Bing's creations of Neo English calligraphy in the United States, Britain, Japan and other developed countries have a high degree of recognition. Some countries have set up a special course to study Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art. However, in China, Xu Bing's calligraphy is criticized. Some extreme people consider Xu Bing's calligraphy art as nothing more than "Showing Off". How can we make a fair evaluation on Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art? This is a question we must seriously consider when we attempt to appreciate Xu Bing's artistic value of the new "Chinese Symbol". Xu Bing believes that the Neo English calligraphy is the continuation of the Chinese calligraphy process. Its design looks Chinese, but the actual form of writing is in English. In promoting calligraphy, Xu Bing sets up English Calligraphy classes in the gallery. There are blackboard, desks, and chairs, ink writing utensils and teaching wall charts in the classroom. Xu Bing has published a "New Basic English Calligraphy" textbooks and "Neo English calligraphy teaching" video and traditional calligraphy training to be used in the "track practice book". The exhibition visitors would enter a place of study when they come to the exhibition hall. Created by this oriental calligraphy fused with English culture, viewers would have gained an unprecedented experience. In this familiar and unfamiliar transformation, the old concept of culture is challenged, thereby opening more space for thought to find the origin of cognition. Neo English calligraphy is no different from being a general person; somewhat ordinary that lures the audience into perceiving it as looking good and very beautiful at first, but subsequently causing them to realize that the original is so different after all. Since Xu Bing's creation of Neo English art fuses the traditional Chinese art and the Western alphabet art elements, it may be considered as "Nondescript". At this time, to make the public (even a small number of people) recognize Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art, it is necessary for the public to first understand its manifestations. Although there

already have been a number of studies on it, there are many drawbacks in the existing research results, for example, in the study of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy creation, the analysis of its form of expression. This research gap serves as the problem statement for this research paper.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

- To study the expressive forms of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy
- To explore the reception of Neo English calligraphy in the world

### **1.4 Research Questions**

- What exactly are the expressive forms of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy?
- How is the reception of Neo English calligraphy in the world?

### **1.5 Research Design**

(1) My research design is based on reading related academic literature based on Chinese traditional calligraphy art of Xu Bing prints and his Neo English calligraphy creation. It also helps to sum up the characteristics, the manifestations and its impact in China and others.

(2) This paper analyze of the Cognition of Neo English calligraphy art not only in China, but also the world out of China and Xu Bing's artworks with calligraphy artists abroad. These enable me to get a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of their forms and the possible impact of Xu Bing's calligraphy.

### **1.6 Significance of the Research**

Chinese calligraphy is one of the important elements of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy artwork. It does not only have formal beauty but also makes Neo English

calligraphy more scholarly, simple and elegant. Xu Bing's long-term commitment to discuss the different cultures in the text and language hopes to address any misplaced and misread of artworks. The Neo English calligraphy is similar to Chinese calligraphy, but it's hard to understand the meaning of the new form of writing. However, using the English spelling method, the meaning can be easily understood. When people enjoy the Neo English calligraphy, they also enjoy the beauty of Chinese calligraphy art. The artistic beauty of English calligraphy and ink calls for an awareness of the spirit and connotation of the Neo English calligraphy. Actually, the debate about Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is fierce. Supporters believe that Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is a bold innovation, while opponents think it is nothing more than just pseudo-Chinese character, with no attributing value. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the expression forms of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy to unearth the rich connotation culture of Neo English calligraphy. The following are the two significant points:

**(1) Theoretical significance:** Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy manifestations and the traditional culture of Chinese calligraphy are somehow the same at the point of Calligraphy. Exploring the aesthetic spirit and value orientation of the Neo English calligraphy can help contemporary Chinese artists to express thoughts, emotions and temperament. It has a certain theoretical significance that helps others understand the special form and social impact of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy and its international identity. From my observation, Neo English calligraphy is the result of two different text systems being forced together, people will find a familiar text but cannot call its name. If you don't know English, then the contribution of Neo English calligraphy is that it will challenge the current concept of culture.

**(2) Practical significance:** Chinese calligraphy is an artistic form of expression with long-term international influence. From the perspective of calligraphy art and

relationship to the traditional Chinese calligraphy innovation and development, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has epoch significance. Therefore, choosing this topic to analyze the relationship between the Neo English calligraphy and traditional Chinese calligraphy, gives great practical significance to inherit the traditional Chinese calligraphy culture and carry forward the innovation consciousness.

### **1.7 Scope of Research**

The scope of this paper is as:

- (1) Researching on the development and formation of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy;
- (2) Studying the expression of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art;
- (3) Exploring the social Impact of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art.

In this paper, the selection of Xu Bing artwork is mostly his Character artwork; however it is not only focusing on his Neo English calligraphy but will also mention his other reprehensive artworks. This helps people to better understand Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art as having had certain reference.

### **1.8 Theoretical Framework**

Lines are the formal languages of calligraphy art. Whether they are Chinese characters or English letters, or Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy, lines, or characters written in this article will have a direct impact on the beauty, value, and expression of calligraphy art. Therefore, in the study of the expressive forms of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy, this paper analyzes the structural characteristics, spelling methods, aesthetic forms and value forms of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy based on "Qiu Zhenzhong's Calligraphy Theory". Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is not only the

fusion of traditional Chinese characters and modern English letters, but also a spatial transformation, which makes the Neo English calligraphy having its own expression language. For example, this is seen in its structures of the left and right, the upper and lower, the surrounding and line beauty.<sup>1</sup>

### **1.9 Definition of Terms Used in the Study**

Chinese calligraphy has a long history and has a certain influence at home and abroad. However, due to the complicated structure of Chinese characters, the basic strokes are more elaborate, which leads to Chinese characters becoming one of the more difficult languages in the world. In these paper, in simple terms, the Study of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is a kind of square word which be designed on the basis of fully considering the shape of Chinese characters and the shape of English letters.

### **1.10 Summary**

The introduction part is the basic chapter of this paper, mainly on discussing Chinese calligraphy and English calligraphy, Xu Bing's art creation and Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Shuai Zhu, "[Qiu Zhenzhong: Calligraphy Theory and Contemporary Scholarship] ", Art Observation, no. 11 (2010):120.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This part summarizes the research results and literatures of Xu Bing and his artwork and especially his Neo English calligraphy. Neo English calligraphy is a combination of with the English symbol and the structure of Chinese characters. Some people think of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art has a certain value or innovation to advocate. It helped cultural fusion of traditional Chinese characters and elements of western letters. It is of great significance to promote the culture of Chinese characters and strengthen cultural exchanges between China and the West. Others believe that Neo English calligraphy, as a pseudo-Chinese character, is a kind of typical personal behavior of worship things foreign and fawns on upon foreigners. It's so-called "calligraphy creation" doesn't have any readability and value. In this chapter, we mainly literature reviewed on the manifestation of Xu Bing's calligraphy and its social impact.

### **2.2 Interpretation of Xu Bing's Art Creation from Scholars in Different Ways**

Xu Bing designed and engraved thousands of new "Chinese Characters", mainly by symbol, image and other more profound topic to show the thinking and essence of Chinese culture. It is a bold "innovation" of traditional Chinese characters. Xu Bing's art were in the collection of national art museum of China, Australia's national gallery Neo English calligraphy, the British museum in London and a number of art agencies. With the increasing popularity of Xu Bing and the continuous innovation of his artistic creation, the research on Xu Bing's artworks has gradually increased.

Sarah E. Fraser's volume offers a path-breaking reassessment of Xu Bing's oeuvre by analyzing the diverse cultural environments in which his work has developed since the Book from the Sky. "It contains three lecture transcripts and eight art historical essays; these explore themes such as Xu's animal works, audience participation, new



ink, prints, realism, socialist spectacle, and word play." <sup>2</sup> A critical question addressed in this volume is what carries art to a global level beyond regional histories and cultural symbols.

(Su Xiaojie 2016). Xu Bing is a confident artist who never repeats himself and does not imitate others. When his artwork began to attract attention, there were heated arguments about his work which he ignored. Instead, he went out and continues with his new artistic exploration. He combined art and ideas, with social life that were closely united under certain concept, which attract more public attention and strong support on the issue of art exploration in social life. Art itself is constantly changing. Whether it is print, oil paintings or Chinese paintings, resistance to change, can break the limit of traditional framework. Regardless of the real value of Xu Bing's artworks and his creative thinking, the "Wood Forest", "Book from the Sky" and his other works are enough to certify that he is a "model" of a contemporary artist.<sup>3</sup>

(Roger T 2011). Xu Bing staying in the United States for 18 years is an important contributing factor to his calligraphy series of works. It contributed to his career as an artist with fresh cultural baptism. His artistic language has Chinese traditional marks and the characteristics of Western avant-garde expression. It is the expression of himself views of the times. This expression stems from his traditional thinking and traditional response from Xu Bing's heart. This caused him to be quickly accepted into the traditional artists' group. However, every piece of Xu Bing's work gives people surprise and leaves memory for people, like "A Lingering Song". At first glance the avant-garde work bold is with a sense of visual conflict. Further appreciation of the artwork creates a

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<sup>2</sup> SaraH. Tsao and R.T. Ames, Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections (State University of New York Press, 2011).5.h E. Fraser, "Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky."2.

<sup>3</sup> Xiao-Jie Su "[the Importance of "Concept" in Contemporary Art from Xu Bing's Works]" (Master, Hubei Academy of Fine Arts 2016).13.

sense of familiarity and evokes a feeling of unspeakable awe. The ideas and artworks complement each other in Xu Bing's artistic creation.

(Britta Erickson 2001). Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has a relatively high visibility in foreign countries. Some universities have opened a special course to study Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art. For example, in 2007, Columbia University opened the "Xu Bing's Calligraphy Art Course", mainly to study on the characteristics, performance and value of Xu Bing's calligraphy art. This will elevate Xu Bing's new calligraphy art from a simple appreciation to the normative academic research level. Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has been internationally recognized, to some extent, this is attributed to the fusion of Chinese and Western elements of the calligraphy. Hence, ordinary people in foreign countries would find this more intuitive and easy to appreciate compared to Chinese calligraphy.<sup>4</sup>

(Jia Mengfei 2012). Xu Bing claimed that he did not want his works to be classified under a certain art genre and to become a mainstream. Although Xu Bing likes his artworks to be known, he does not want his creativity to be classified. We can say that Xu Bing's art has identity and conceptual characteristics. "ART FOR THE PEOPLE" is an application of "English Calligraphy". Xu Bing uses the inkjet computer to print the English calligraphy characters "ART FOR THE PEOPLE" in yellow on the red flag that is hanging at the entrance of The Museum of Modern Art. Regardless of whether his works should be classified or not, its artistic creation has indeed become an undeniably a unique category. Xu Bing's series of creation especially the Neo English calligraphy art one is of the important causes of widespread controversy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> B. Erickson, B. Xu, and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, *The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words*(Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2001):18.

<sup>5</sup> Meng-fei, Jia "[on the Writing in Xu Bing's Art]," *Popular Literature*, no. 14 (2012).152.

(Zhang Hui 2014). Xu Bing's calligraphy medium is a symbol of Chinese cultural reflection. Under the image of the "text game" is implied a profound and deep-rooted meaning of various Chinese cultural issues. It is more common in the works of artists to reveal the meaning of culture or the problem in the form of art. Xu Bing revealed the most basic unit of cultural problems: Historically, the use of text is inextricably linked to cultural dynamics.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, the study of Xu Bing's art has been gradually increased in China. Many studies remain as introductory and superficial analysis, and rarely touch on the deep Chinese cultural origins. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct archaeological survey to study the cultural roots and meanings of Xu Bing's writing.

### **2.3 Research on the Value and Positive Impact of the Neo English Calligraphy**

It is quite common to study the artistic value of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy. Many researchers believe that the Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art combines the essence of Chinese traditional characters and the elements of English alphabet. This realized the "fusion" of Chinese characters and Western word art which do help foreigners to understand Chinese character and realize its great significance.

(Zheng Haiwen 2013). I argue that Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is a fusion of Chinese characters and English elements. It is a direct expression of the fusion of Chinese and Western culture and art exchange. It has played a role in promoting the spread of Chinese character culture in Western developed countries. Positive role, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is not what some people think of being "false calligraphy." The emergence and development of new calligraphy art will inevitably lead to all kinds of controversy. Neo English calligraphy embodies the creation of wisdom and ability. It has a strong sense of modernity. It is a bold "innovation" in

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<sup>6</sup> Hui Zhuang "How Words Become Images" (Master, CAFA, 2014):8.

traditional writing that redefines literacy. Today the diversified development trends are continually strengthened; this innovation greatly broadens people's creative thinking. Through the use of the English elements and Chinese characters elements to re-arrange a bold combination of calligraphy, this effectively leads to a realization of China's Chinese characters in the promotion of calligraphy art to the world.<sup>7</sup>

(Long Houqiang 2008). Neo English calligraphy is a combination of Chinese and Western "Book from the Sky" the two different systems of Chinese and Western languages are difficult to communicate the formation of barriers.<sup>8</sup> It will form a cage of two cultural systems. Neo English calligraphy" is technically to make communication become possible from an aesthetics point of view. The "Book from the Sky" is a Xu Bing's 'game'. Those who understand Chinese characters and English word can join the Neo English calligraphy into two languages and participate in the game. English is a world language; by the same token Neo English calligraphy has become a world game that can be played. It can be seen here, the power of using the game to deconstruct the language cage. "Book from the Sky" is a text game composed of Chinese characters and strokes. The deconstruction of the Chinese characters and strokes questions the limitations of the text, language, knowledge. This kind of deconstruction, explains the huge explanatory space, with its infinite write ability. Xu Bing is a professional engraver with his experience in printing and calligraphy, while exuding the charm of the language.<sup>9</sup>

(Yang Qing 2016). Neo English calligraphy combines the English symbols with the structure of Chinese characters. Its law of reading begins from left to right, from top to bottom, from outside to inside; but when writing, it is not necessarily in full

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<sup>7</sup> Hai-Wen Zheng "[Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy Is Not 'Fake Calligraphy']," *Youth Literator*, no. 36 (2013).80.

<sup>8</sup> Hou-Qiang Long, and Qing-Xing Ren, "[Cultural Games of Conceptual Art -- a Brief Analysis of Xu Bing's Art]," *Film Literature*, no. 10 (2008).152.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

compliance. Sometimes if the word is too complex, there will be adjustments made to the structure. Sometimes a logical top to bottom flow will be written as from left to right. Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is not normative and has a strong tendency to read its characteristics in "traditional Chinese art", but after transformation of the English alphabet to create the "new text", it has high aesthetic features and ideals.<sup>10</sup>

(Li Peng 2014). Xu Bing's new calligraphy as an art received numerous awards in the international community. The reason for this is its new form of art organically combines together the Chinese traditional box of the planar structure and the Western phoneme text. The resulting unique shape, exhibits an aesthetic resonance of the East and West. At present, the evaluation of the Neo English calligraphy has mixed review domestically with Xu Bing's creation of the Neo English calligraphy art considered of little value. He is to ingratiate oneself with the Western non-mainstream culture in hopes of making them like the gesture. To evaluate Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art, we must first understand the difference between "calligraphy" and "art". Calligraphy art should be attributed to the ranks of art and should not be divided or classified into the text category.<sup>11</sup>

(Zhang Jinxian 2016) said in his Master's thesis "Xu Bing's Public Appeal", I explore the characteristics of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art. His creation Neo English calligraphy considers the public factors and adds a lot of interaction with the public. Xu Bing tried to promote Neo English calligraphy as a language.<sup>12</sup> Neo English calligraphy is one of the important works of Xu Bing after moving to the United States. It was regarded as one of the highest cross-cutting awards in the United States by obtaining the "Genius Award", which is the famous "MacArthur Award".

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<sup>10</sup> Qing Yang. "[the Cross-Boundary Thinking of Printmaking Triggered by Xu Bing's Works]" (Master, NENU(Northeast Normal University), 2016):12

<sup>11</sup> Peng Li "[Focus Analysis of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy Style]," *Forum on Chinese Culture* (2014):76.

<sup>12</sup> Jin-Xian Zhang "[Research on Public Appeal of Xu Bing's Works]" (CCNU(Central China Normal University), 2016):4.

## 2.4 Research on the Negative Effects of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy

Innovation signifies the denial of tradition. Based on this, Xu Bing is bold to innovate. Many scholars, experts and even the general public think that Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has no artistic value at all. It is a grandstanding of humble flattery for Western art culture.

(He Qing 2012). It is a "Conspiracy of Art" bluntly said: the United States under the guise of the so-called 'times', cover up the validity of other countries, national art, culture and publicly rendering theirs as "Lofty Art". It is important that Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy to some extent meets the "American Art" requirements. This is why he won the US "Noble Prize" award for his Neo English calligraphy. From this award, He Qing clearly pointed out that Xu Bing and the other so-called "Chinese Symbol Artist" is the "Humble Flattery" of the Western art culture accepted by the United States. It is more utilitarian and almost of no literary value at all.<sup>13</sup>

(Li Yannan 2011). Xu Bing's new calligraphy art is inseparable from the art of engravings. However, the special "Chinese Symbols" and "Text Spaces" make up the unique characteristics of this new calligraphy art. It is difficult for others to understand the value of this art let alone to the artistic creator himself. Despite the United States, Japan and other countries respect for the "Calligraphy Art", their calligraphy like art forms cannot be counted as true Chinese calligraphy art. At most, Xu Bing can be seen as a creator of an unconventional writing. From the calligraphy point of view, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy and our traditional "Calligraphy Art" have almost no link. Xu Bing's works is his own special creation and imagination. Xu Bing's reference

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<sup>13</sup> Qing He "[the Conspiracy of Art] ", *Collection and Investment*, no. 2 (2015):156.

of the combination of Chinese and Western as Neo English calligraphy may not be understood by many. Its usefulness and the value may only be identifiable to himself.<sup>14</sup>

(Yan Feng 2009). In his master's thesis "Xu Bing's pseudo-Chinese characters art reflection on calligraphy art and the relationship between Chinese characters", Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art creation's relationship with the traditional Chinese characters was systematically and comprehensively analyzed. Chinese characters are not only "artistic" (for example, official script, regular script, etc.) It is more important to have practicality. The practicality of Chinese characters in making itself relevant to correct times is one of the reasons of its influence. The creation of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy, cleverly lies in the writing tools used for traditional Chinese writing such as pen, ink, paper, ink stone and brush, regardless of its numerous manifestations: dot, dash, structure, tricks, inscription, stamp, or mounted and so on. All this follow the traditional Chinese calligraphy art norms. It has some of the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese calligraphy, but still cannot be regarded it as calligraphy due to its impracticality.<sup>15</sup>

(Yu Guanghua 2011). Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy as a modern calligraphy is unique. It looks like an innovative Chinese calligraphy. It is a symbolic "writing revolution". It is not only "non-calligraphy", but also authentic "anti-calligraphy". Whether the Neo English calligraphy writing is through the "Training cultivation of heterogeneous culture's affinities" approach or calligraphy of the aesthetic concept, its practice needs to be verified.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Yan-Nan Li "[Experience Xu Bing's Installation Works]" (ECNU(East China Normal University), 2011):18.

<sup>15</sup> Feng Yan"[Reflection on the Relationship between Calligraphy Art and Chinese Characters from Xu Bing's Creation of Pseudo-Chinese Characters]" (Shandong University, 2009):6.

<sup>16</sup> Guang - Hua Yang "[Looking at Contemporary Conceptual Art from the Perspective of Semiotics -- Taking Xu Bing's Contemporary Calligraphy Creation as an Example]," *Journal of Chongqing RTV University*, no. 06 (2015):29.

(Yang Xinyi 2009). About the modernity of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy, I think this can be understood as Xu Bing's calligraphy to reflect the pioneering of Chinese culture in the global cultural transmission. Using the Chinese invented paper and calligraphy in his artworks on the cultural social network gives the world civilization contemporary significance. We have to ask in this exchange; Xu Bing used the Chinese characters translated into English or used the English translated into Chinese characters? Which of these truly reflect Xu Bing's approach? Is Neo English calligraphy able to be accepted by the Chinese people? Or can it be accepted by the English-speaking countries? To what extent can the aesthetic concept of calligraphy be spread to Anglo-American countries? <sup>17</sup>

(Du Yutong 2017). Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is a kind of philosophical symbol of international development of contemporary Chinese art. Through the approach of fusing the elements of Chinese characters and English letters, it provides a way to solve some social problems. Xu Bing is concerned with the manner with which people use language in ordinary life. Thus his creations of Neo English calligraphy reflect the Chinese and Western cultural exchanges and Chinese language thinking mode of art works. However, this language of the different cultures seen in the works seems absurd and illogical. The text is the exchange of tools in Xu Bing's eyes, but it has become a search for the form of human civilization. <sup>18</sup>

## **2.5 Conclusion**

One of the many values of calligraphy art is that it should be "Readable" and can be recognized and accepted by the majority of the audience. Otherwise, the art of calligraphy will lose its value. Drawing from this research literature findings, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art has a certain value or creative people advocate Neo English

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<sup>17</sup> Xin-Yi Yang "Read Xu Bing's Art Concept," *Chinese Art*, no. 01 (2004):29.

<sup>18</sup> Yu-Tong Du "[on the Evaluation Criteria of Calligraphy Art]," *Art Education*, no. 2 (2017):175.



calligraphy art is a bold attempt and innovation. It realizes culture Integration of the traditional Chinese characters and Western alphabet elements. Promoting the Chinese character culture by strengthening the cultural exchange between China and the West has important significance. Some people think that the Neo English calligraphy art is pseudo-Chinese characters. It is a typical personal and celebratory behavior of worshipping foreign things. So-called "calligraphy creation" does not have any readability and value. However, all the research done that didn't put too much emphasis on the expressive forms of Xu Bing Neo English calligraphy. The expressive form will help people easily understand Neo English calligraphy. In this paper, we try to break through the limitation of Xu Bing's calligraphy art and discuss concrete manifestation of Xu Bing's new calligraphy art on the basis of existing research results. We will focus to discuss Xu Bing's specific construction form of the new art of calligraphy and its impact on the world. This helps people to better understand Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art as having had certain reference.

## CHAPTER 3: XU BING AND XU BING ART

### 3.1 Introduction

The modern and contemporary art in China cannot circumvent the retrospection and reflection of the cultural craze in the 1980s. In an area of urgently waits to renew, ambitious artists are not satisfied with suppressed living and creation conditions after the "85 New Wave Art Movement".<sup>19</sup> The suppression and blame of traditional forces, the lack of exhibition conditions, the lack of insightful critics and collectors led to a group of artists embarking on the road of seeking overseas study and development, Xu Bing is one of the artists. Xu Bing's good use of the collision between Eastern and Western culture and art and the geographical context of his geography not only makes his works carry his special cultural atmosphere, but also has a speculation that linked with the changes of this society, especially as a Chinese artist's effort to build self-discourse systems and personal identities in a global context.

This chapter takes the existing art criticism text of Xu Bing as the research object, discusses the public's attention to Xu Bing's art works in different periods. By examining the modern critical framework and analyzing each stage of Xu Bing's creation, we can get a more clear idea about his creation of Neo English calligraphy. This chapter consists of five sections. The second section mainly introduces Xu Bing's personal experience and artistic resume. In the third section, Xu Bing's creation is divided into three periods, and the corresponding criticisms are traced back. From 1985 to 1990, the main stage discussed the complex relationship between art criticism and concept form. The second stage was from 1991 to 2007. This was the period when Xu Bing did his creation in the United States, mainly explaining the conflicts and exchanges between Chinese and Western cultures. The process of self-cultural identity

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<sup>19</sup> From 1985 to 1989 during the four years, some Chinese art critics in the "China Art News" constantly introduced European and American modern art, and introduced the younger generation of avant-garde artists on the front page headlines.

search; the last stage is to return to China in 2008, and to discuss the issue of the value of contemporary art, art criticism presents a diversified scene in the face of new artistic problems. The fourth section is to let the audience further understand the connotation and meaning of Xu Bing's character art and analyze his character art.

### **3.2 Xu Bing's Resume**

Xu Bing (Figure 3.1), a contemporary artist, was born in 1955 in Chongqing, China. At the age of one, Xu moved to Beijing with his parents who working at Peking University. He has experienced the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. In 1974, he was arranged to go to the Shouliang village of Yanqing County, Beijing, there he worked as a farmer. He attended the college entrance examination and was admitted at the central Academy of Fine Arts in 1977 and focused on drawing and printmaking. He graduated and taught there in the 1981. In 1984, he began studying for a master's degree at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and he earned a MFA in 1987.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Fei-Yu Wong " [the Story Behind Xu Bing's Words]," *Young Writers* (2015):22.



**Figure 3.1 Xu Bing's Photo**

In 1990, he was invited as honorary artist by University of Wisconsin Madison University to visit the United States and then he moved there and where has spent almost 20 years. In 2007, he returned to China and from 2008 to 2014, Xu Bing served as the vice president of CAFA, where he is now a professor and the director of Academic Committee. He currently lives and works in Beijing and New York.<sup>21</sup>

He has held personal art exhibitions at major art institutions such as the Washington National Museum of Fine Arts, the New York Museum of Fine Arts, the New York Museum of Art, the Bronx Museum of Fine Arts, the Spanish Museum of Miró Foundation, and the Czech National Museum. He was invited to participate in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

important joint exhibitions in Britain, France, Canada, Japan, Australia, Finland, Italy, Germany, South Korea and other countries. Throughout his life, he has published several books including "China's 20th Century Art and Artists," "Art Past and Present", "Oxford Art History: Chinese Art", and "Chinese Art and Cultural History". Several of his famous artworks such as "Book from the Sky", "Ghosts Pounding the Wall", "Book from the Ground", "Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?", "Forest Project", "Language Lost", "Neo English Calligraphy" and "Art for the People" earned Xu international recognition. In this research, we will focus on Neo English calligraphy.

In the early of 1994, Xu Bing began to study and create Neo English calligraphy, which is closely related to his new and unfamiliar living conditions in the United States. There, Xu Bing has been thinking how to use English letters to write Chinese calligraphy. After several attempts, he finally came up with a set of writing methods. He published "Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy entry" tutorial. Eventually, the Neo English calligraphy tutorial is used in the American school's course. The Australian Ministry of Education implements Neo English calligraphy into the newly established Australian "IQ Measurement System". The Japanese Ministry of Culture also implements Neo English calligraphy into the character library. All over the world, a lot of signs are written in this style of calligraphy. His Neo English calligraphy artworks are exhibited in the China Art Museum, Australian National Gallery, London British Museum and many other institutes of art.

Xu Bing became famous in the 1980s. In 1999, he was the first Chinese to win the "McArthur Genius Award" which is the highest award in the American cultural world. He was concerned by the art circles at home and abroad, even the cultural circle. In 2006, he was awarded the Printmaking Art Achievement Award by the National Printmakers Association; in 2007, he was awarded the title of AAC2007 Art China •

Artist of the Year; in 2014, he was awarded the "Art Medal" by the US State Department, etc.

### **3.3 Three Stages of Xu Bing's Artistic Creation**

#### **3.3.1 Introduction**

Xu Bing's artistic career can be roughly divided into three stages which are from 1985-1990, 1991-2007 and 2008 to now. The dividing of these three stages are mainly based on Xu Bing's personal experience and the time of completion of his artworks. His upbringing and life trajectory contributed a lot to his creation of artwork, specially his life experience during the year of 1974 to 1984. During this period, the hand-printed publications "Brilliant Mountain Flower" (1975-1977), prints "Broken Jade" (1977-1983) and "Busy Water Town" (1980) were created, while it is not necessary to go into more details of these artworks.

#### **3.3.2 Year 1985-1990**

This stage started in 1985 when Xu Bing with the young faculty members of the Printmaking Department created the act and installation work "The Big Wheel" and until 1990 they finished the artwork of the "Ghosts Pounding the Wall". The four works of "The Big Wheel", "Five Complex Series", "Analysis of the World – Book from the Sky" and "Ghosts Pounding the Wall" were the beginnings of Xu Bing's artistic creation. These works reflected Xu Bing's experiment on the concept of "plurality" to a certain extent, reflecting the academic background of his birth of printmaking and his persistence in the meaning of "imprint".<sup>22</sup> The exhibition of "Analysis of the World - Book from the Sky" also reminded the art circle of Xu Bing's name.

The work "Analysis of the World - Book from the Sky" consists of more than 4,000 "pseudo Chinese characters". However, these "Pseudo Chinese Characters" were

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<sup>22</sup> Britta Erickson, *Three Installations by Xu Bing*(University of Wisconsin Press, 1991):21.

dismantled and reorganized by the strokes of Chinese characters, no one understands. These "Texts" are unreadable because they do not have the functionality of a text-bearing meaning. These "Pseudo-Chinese Characters", which are similar to Chinese people, but are the meanings of the artist's removal of real characters. The revelation of Xu Bing's "Book from the Sky" to Chinese avant-garde art laid in his attitude towards the art text, that is he strived to create a meaningless text belonging to him, a huge void. The "Pseudo-Chinese Characters" and the shape of the Chinese characters and the emptiness of the actual content form an absurdity. This absurdity is a challenge to all the established methods, principles and laws, and reflects a profound contrast. It attempted go to nothingness and also an analytical method of free dialogue with the text itself, which surprised and confused people in the art world at the time, but in terms of the unity of concept and image, language and aesthetics, — the artwork "Book from the Sky" has touched the soul and heart of people.

Another important work: "Ghosts Pounding the Wall" (Figure 3.2) using traditional Chinese elements as a medium of rebellious ideas, was created by Xu Bing and his students. They lived and worked hard nearby the Great Wall for almost a month.<sup>23</sup> By copying a section of the city wall and a beacon tower they had reproduced the brick wall texture under time. In the production of rubbings, countless repeated beatings have inherited the creative state of The Asceticism and Arts of the World and the intellectuals' thinking about traditional culture. After the completion of Ghosts Pounding the Wall, Xu Bing brought it to the United States. It is considered to be a huge and shocking print.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 3.2 One of the Representative works from 1985 to1990: Ghosts Pounding the Wall**

During this time, Xu Bing's artistic creation was deeply influenced by social and political aspects of the special period. His artwork mainly reflected his experience of "cultural fever" in the early 1980s and his insights into changes in the art world as bystanders, such as "Star Art Exhibition", "April Film Festival", "Peking Triangle", "Democracy Wall", "Little Theater" and the artwork "The Art Phenomenon". Behind the wave of these phenomena and the renewal of ideas, the expectation of theory and the inequality of practice have made artists more confused. At the same time, Xu Bing said: I have read a lot of books, participated in a lot of cultural discussions, and felt uncomfortable.<sup>24</sup> The feeling is just like a hungry person suddenly ate too much. And he started to hate the so-called culture. This is called 'culture' which always has an inappropriate relationship between things and us.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Run-Juan Zhang "[Xu Bing: Art Is Fatalistic]," *Art and design*, no. 3 (2014):153.

<sup>25</sup> "[Xu Bing: 'Phoenix' after All, Can Not Be Separated from the 'Tattered' Nature]," *Beijing Youth Daily* 2012. Section 2.



### 3.3.3 Year 1991-2007

This stage for Xu Bing spanned 17 years when appeared in public as an overseas Chinese artist. In the meantime, his artworks are diverse in the form and creative techniques, presenting different levels of language experiments, the continuous exploration of the art of words in particular, the metaphorical expression of animal elements as well as the persistence of the works in terms of integrity and continuity. A large number of traditional cultural elements are used by Xu Bing to better exploring art. From the first work "A, B, C" (1991) created in the United States to his returning to China in 2007. There are artworks the "Panda Paradise" (1998), "Sericulture in the United States" series (1994-1998) and Neo English calligraphy related works "Cultural Negotiation" (1992), "Ice in Braille" (1993), "Cultural Animal" (1994), "Sketch Sydney" (2000), "Transfer" (1996-2006) and so on.

The artwork "A, B, C" used the homophones of Chinese characters to interpret 26 English letters, just like the lazy move by English beginners to use Chinese characters to express pronunciation, presenting and reflecting the subtle relationship between the two kinds of characters. The artwork expressed the anxiety and thinking of the living environment brought by the geopolitical factors. His artwork "Wu Street" (Chinese pronunciation is Wu Jie 误解 Misunderstanding) is a homonym from "5th Street" in East Village New York (Chinese pronunciation is Wu Jie 误解).<sup>26</sup> The artist juxtaposes the oil paintings collected from the Dongcun bins and the articles of the famous painter Jonathan Lascaux in the "World Art" magazine in China, which is full of reflections on the sources of Western art values and cultural adaptability. "Cultural Animal" (Figure 3.3) explored the burden of culture and restrictions on thinking. The trampling and shackles of pigs on books are caused by the nature of animals. The mating of pigs is

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<sup>26</sup> Eugene Yue - Jin Wang, "Of Text and Texture: The Cultural Relevance of Xu Bing's Art," *Xu Bing: Language Lost, exh. cat.* (Boston: Massachusetts College of Art, 1995), 12.

contrasted with the ecstasy and convulsions of bystanders. The works created by writing different "characters" on animals and mating behavior of animals to eliminate the communication, collision and intersection of Chinese and Western cultures. The nature of animals is unveiled even under the modification of culture. "Enthusiasm" is the instinct of animals, while the discomfort of the audience comes from the role of the "Prudent" side of culture. In this extreme way, artists explored intercultural communication. The work "transfer" is a process when Chinese language is translated into English, then translated into another language, and then continued until it is translated back into Chinese, and the meaning deviation and ambiguity generated by this progress are compared. The work explored the deviation of people's understanding of the same thing in different regions and different mother tongue cultures and attempted to propose dyslexia in communication and understand the formation of barriers and unavoidable realities.



Figure 3.3 One of the Representative works from 1991 to 2007: Cultural Animal

In artistic creation, he tried to involve animal elements to seek the relationship between the symbolic meaning of symbols and the communication of civilization behind self-cultural identity. The use of monkeys, pigs, sheep, birds, silkworms corresponds to his artworks "Monkey Fishing Moon" (2001), "Cultural Animal" (1994), "Chain" (1998),<sup>27</sup> "Bird Language" (2003), "American Silkworm" series (1994-1998), etc. In the selection of these culture-representative animal images, the artist found a balance between survival and positioning. They not only absorb the nutrition of traditional Chinese culture, but also borrow the allusions of western culture. The artwork turned into metaphor for the selected elements to complete the transform. "Metaphor" is a text whose meaning is intended to make use of people's specific cognitive and linguistic resources in persuasion, so that metaphorical expression can have the potential to arouse people's emotional reactions, and achieve the purpose of realizing the concept of text consciousness.<sup>28</sup> With the help of images in visual culture, the use of metaphors gives the artwork a cultural meaning beyond rhetoric. In the "Sericulture in the United States" series, there are four pieces of "Silkworm", "Parcel", "Silkworm" and "Video (VCR) of Silkworm". The image of "Silkworm" in the series is represented by the Chinese woven and weaving civilization for thousands of years. The silkworm was brought up under western culture and left to nibble finally. The spit out of the silk envelops the wreckage of the book. The meaning given by this process started from its own cultural and traditional thinking to encircle and resolve the non-existing cultural environment. The "VCR of the Silkworm" jumped out of the contrast between Chinese and Western cultures and explored the issue of peaceful symbiosis in the face of challenging modern civilization in the way of traditional production and thinking. These four works presented progressive thinking in narrative, from the faint nostalgia in

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<sup>27</sup> It describes: a long chain, with words from a poem by John berg, stretches from the gallery to the lawn or garden outside, with a white sheep tied at the end.

<sup>28</sup> Yan-Ji Yu, and Hua Chen, "[a New Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis: Critical Metaphor Analysis]," Journal of Xiamen university (philosophy and social sciences edition), no. 06 (2007):43.

the West to the firm cultural beliefs, recording the cultural collisions that occur in artists and the constant search for their own positioning.

"Text is the most basic element of cultural concept and the transformation of characters is the transformation of the most essential part of human thinking".<sup>29</sup> The "Text" element is a highly recognizable artistic vocabulary in Xu Bing's artworks, with personal and contemporary characteristics. This is a very important perspective for understanding his artistic ideas and cultural thinking. Discussing Xu Bing's works of art, whether it is his early artwork "Analysis of the World - Book from the Sky" (1988), or Neo English calligraphy artworks "Reading Landscape: Himalayan Sketching" (1999), "Sketching Sydney"(2000), which are based on 26 English letters, written in the Chinese style. These artworks are inspired from "characters". Neo English calligraphy turned the linear flow writing mode into a square-like form similar to Chinese characters in the form of construction. It seemed that the progress is only a formal change; however it actually conveys the difference in the way of thinking behind the different writing habits of Chinese and Western characters. Xu Bing tried to challenge the integration of these two modes of thinking, through the transformation and re-casting of the text, in order to achieve a new way of reading and communication.

#### **3.3.4 Year 2008 until Now**

At this stage Xu Bing has returned to China since 2008. For a total of twelve years, Xu Bing has maintained more than two exhibitions per month in addition to his creation, teaching and daily administrative work. He has created 28 new works in this period. While discovering new social problems, his artworks of this period also continued the creative ideas and techniques of the first two stages of his artworks,

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<sup>29</sup> Bing Xu, Shuang-Xi Yin, and Bo-Yi Feng. "[the Growth of Ideas -- Dialogue between Xu Bing, Yin Shuangxi and Feng Boyi]," Art Research, no. 03 (2005):25.

showing a certain degree of coherence, however belongs to several categories with multiple performance characteristics. These works include "Phoenix" (2010), "Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll" (2010), "The Ideal of Peach Blossoms Must Be Realized" (2013), "Character of Chinese Characters" (2013), "Text Writing" (2013) and a series of "Background Story", such as "Background Story: Dwelling in Fuchun Mountains" (2008), "Background Story: Old Trees, Level Distance" (2018), "Background Story: Rocky Dwelling" (2010), "Background Story: Water Village" (2012), "Dragonfly Eyes" and so on.

The "Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll" is a giant landscape painting handwritten by copying and collaging famous Chinese paintings. The "Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll" focused and standardizes the basic elements of the world. The core feature of Chinese characters and paintings is "Symbolist", which reflected the Chinese conceptualization, symbolic thinking methods and aesthetic attitudes. "Character of Chinese Characters" continued Xu Bing's research and thinking on the evolution of Chinese characters.<sup>30</sup> The work is a 17-minute animation. It begins with "one" and explains the influence of Chinese characters on the shaping of Chinese characters by showing the creation and writing of words. In terms of creative techniques and ideas, the work of "Text Writing" actually begins with the creation of "Reading Landscape - Himalayan Sketching" in 1999, followed by the work "Sketch Sydney" (2000) and "Reading the Landscape-Text Garden" (2001). These artworks have depicted the mountains, water, stones and grasses in nature in the form of text.

The "Background Story" (Figure 3.4) series used light and shadow to project branches and other waste onto the frosted glass and restored many famous Chinese landscape paintings. Through the grasp and use of materials, the classics are reborn,

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<sup>30</sup> Taylor Janelle S and Anderson, Greg "Non-Sense in Context: Xu Bing's Art and Its Publics," *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993):318.

face-to-face and searching for under meanings, exploring a visual contradiction and dialectical relationship between reality and ideality. The frontal of frosted glass is full of traditional spirituality, condensing the order we are eagerly awaiting and the chaos and disorder, ugliness and low-cost formed by its back. This group of public opinions reinforced the expressiveness of the work and explained the particularity and universality of the Chinese experience.



**Figure 3.4 One of the Representative works from 2008 Until Now: Background Story**

"Dragonfly Eyes" comes from the artist's keen observation of the new public channel emerging in the current civilization - network monitoring. Based on a large

amount of public reality material, the artist exposed the reality and cruelty of the real society with these disorganized image fragments. From the plot: a girl who cannot identify her identity has been undergoing a facelift, and her social behavior has become the object of being examined by the audience. The artwork's public nature is reflected in the "nature" of the work itself. The monitoring records are displayed in a rude and meaningful way, so that these pieces of information that no longer give value would challenge the life things that used to taken for granted. Xu Bing understand making the artworks into movies or feature films rather than Video Art can make the expression of conflict more precise and solid. The rapid development of society provides artists with a lot of experimental material and whether contemporary art is reproduced is the focus of art criticism.

### **3.4 Xu Bing's Writing Art**

Xu Bing's work has always been closely related to the text. Xu Bing's early masterpieces include "Analysis of the World - Book from the Sky", "The Post-Contract" in the 1990s, "Silkworm Series", "Introduction to Neo English calligraphy" and "Book from the Ground".<sup>31</sup> His work is clearly based on the book, playing word games. In fact, the title of "Book from the Sky" is not named by Xu Bing himself, but by the audience who are confused with the unrecognizable words of this work. Xu Bing's named it as "The World of Analysis" which means "a mirror of the world." The artworks of "Book from the Sky", Neo English calligraphy and "Book from the Ground" are three important artworks for Xu Bing. Some people think these three artworks have become an important part of the contemporary art in the world like three modern apocalypses.<sup>32</sup>

The text is the medium of human communication, but in the point view of Xu Bing it has become a typical manifestation of the world's absurdity due to his life experience.

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<sup>31</sup> Fei Meng, "[on the Writing in Xu Bing's Art].", *Art Research*, no.3 (1997):152.

<sup>32</sup> Shi Bai, "[Xu Bing Ran out of Peking University Library] ", *Mondo Cinese*, no. 10 (2008):48.

The creation of "Book from the Sky" was at that special stage of the Chinese cultural world. When the "Cultural Revolution" in China broke out, Xu Bing was at her school age and he was forced to write a large-character poster on the outskirts of Beijing. It is awkwardly that here are no books to read while he remembered there used to so many books at his childhood. In 1984, Xu Bing was admitted to the central academy of fine arts for a master's degree. He has read a lot of books during this time and participated in a lot of cultural discussions. At that time, he is like a person who has been hungry for a long time and suddenly he has ate too much. He dislikes the so-called culture. Cultural discussion seems to be a working machine, and once it is up, there is no way to stop. In the end, he was confused the things that used to be clear. He felt what called "culture" did not have a proper relationship with us. At that time, Xu Bing felt that he had to write a book to express this feeling, so "Book from the Sky" was born. This artwork suggested a kind of alertness. Xu Bing said himself: "The "Book from the Sky" expresses my regret for the existing words, and "Book from the Ground" expresses the ideals of the only language in the world."<sup>33</sup> From the artwork "Book from the Sky" to "Book from the Ground" is a progress that Xu Bing first negating the value of text and then he found that there is actually no borders in communication. Xu Bing has always focused on the language cultural symbols and meaning of the books which are the main topics of his art.

Began in 1994, the concept of Neo English calligraphy is the result of the extrusion of contemporary art dilemmas. It is an escape from reality. The style of the work is determined by personal interests and creative habits. The valuable thing about an artwork is to do something worth doing and also others have not done seriously. Neo English calligraphy was quickly promoted and disseminated in various exhibition spaces around the world. There are already classrooms in Munich and Copenhagen that

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<sup>33</sup> Rui Shi, "[Research on Xu Bing's Book of Heaven]," *The world* (2016):229.



teach this new type of Calligraphy. Rows of desks and numerous participants, like the scene of large-scale mass literacy campaigns in the early days of China's liberation, are of great attraction to other learners. People may be curious, but it is much more interesting than the disease-free "art of production".

Why does Xu Bing think of long-term artistic creation in the form and concept of words? This is due to Xu Bing's unique life experience. Xu Bing was born in a traditional Chinese family. His parents asked him to practice calligraphy and read Chinese classical books. When he was a child, he often played in the Peking University Library Department where his mother works. He once said in an interview: "So when I was young, I had access to many books, which made me have a special deep feeling for the words in the book". It can be said that Xu Bing's artwork "Book from the Sky" is born from this emotion. It can also be said that the text is a life style of Xu Bing's successful transformation and projection in his childhood memories. Xu Bing also constantly mentioned that he has a special interest and sensitivity to the form and writing of the book. It is a question of the existing concept. Why does he use words? Because words are the most basic manifestation of the concept of human culture and the transformation of words is the most essential transformation of human thinking. In Xu Bing's own words: "Since humans have come up with words that are not painted, people have become more and more complicated. As they become tired, they are increasingly confused about things." The allegorical functional processing and cultural reflection on the manual work style have made this work widely recognized and praised in the art circles at home and abroad. Neo English calligraphy has combined two systems to create a fluent text system. Strictly speaking, Neo English calligraphy is not a work of art, but a strict font design.<sup>34</sup> Xu Bing explained that all the texts must go

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<sup>34</sup> Feng Bing, and Bo-Yi Xu, "[the Dilemma of the Contemporary Art System - a Dialogue About Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy Introduction]," *Art Research* 1, no. 26 (1997):26.

through a development process from primary to advance, and their own graphic text is still in the "Oracle phase".

The artwork "Book from the Sky" and "Book from the Ground", the former has converted a readable text to unreadable text, while the latter is just opposite. Xu Bing's artwork is mainly to handle the relationship between thinking, language and texts including his doubts about language. These issues are major issues in contemporary philosophy. There are lots of questions that everyone is discussing or to be discussed. Therefore, works related to the texts such as "Book from the Sky", "Neo English calligraphy", and "Book from the Ground" are highly valued.

In fact, using books and texts as the carrier of creation, Xu Bing is not the first one in history. However, in contemporary art, Xu Bing actually is a pioneer in the earlier days of using text as a medium of creation. Other Chinese artists such as Hong Hao and Huang Yongzhen have described books from different angles; they are using books as medium for their artwork. If Xu Bing's work is discussed in the history of global art, his persistence in writing is different from other famous artists in many countries. He is not mainly based on images or installations. Instead, he used words to enhance his artwork. Xu Bing not only focused on experiment, but to find new creative media and artistic expression. Instead, it deepens the meaning of the text in the form of art. We think this can be understood as Xu Bing's use of words to reflect the pioneering nature of Chinese culture in global cultural communication. Putting China's inventions, paper and movable type printing, into the cultural and social network represented by his works, has given the world civilization a contemporary meaning.

In Xu Bing's artworks, the texts he created are unable to read or read completely, He wanted people stopped and started to think. He only uses the concept of words rather than just the form of words. In these types of works, we often combine his words with

most sincerely and aesthetically to express the abstracted concepts that have been deepened. This is the main focus of Xu Bing's work and the profound insights into the text. This insight is profoundly critical. On one hand, under the influence of the viewer's own culture, the definition of the text is readable, so it has the function of spreading knowledge and transforming different social and cultural interfaces: on the other hand, Xu Bing's words are fundamentally unreadable, because its content is singular and abstract. Xu Bing's work expresses a kind of conflict. This kind of conflict is evident in the process of the viewer watching and reading Xu Bing's "Book".

Xu Bing also deliberately designed a situation in his works with text. Let the viewer experience this conflict by mutual assistance with the work. Xu Bing used this kind of conflict to discuss a cultural issue that he constantly understood and recognized: whether culture can be translated and transformed at will. Xu Bing experienced China's cultural turmoil in the 1960s and 1970s, the new trend of thought in the 1980s, and the American immigration culture in the 1990s. He showed these unique cultural experiences in his creation. Especially in his works based on words. From his work, it can be inferred that for Xu Bing, culture is something that should have a copy function in order to become an exchange interface, thereby it will work into promoting the development of human civilization. However, it is obvious that Xu Bing is critical of this culture's possible translation. He uses words as a carrier to reflect personal experiences and perceptions of cultural exchanges. In his works, words exist in a metaphorical way, and should not be directly understood as a medium of creation. Interpreting Xu Bing's artworks from different angle, we observed that his artworks are basically based on Chinese culture with unique aesthetics.

### **3.5 Summary**

This chapter has divided Xu Bing's career of contemporary art into three periods: 1985-1990, 1991-2007, and 2008-present. The creation of his works is related to his social environment as well as his personally life experience of different periods. The criticism stage of Xu Bing's art in China basically corresponds to the stage of Xu Bing's works. However, Xu Bing's artworks and his thoughts on society, art and people are in the process. In the 1980s, China's present and contemporary art have extraordinary representations. The traditional reflected on his works, the possibility of cultural blending, and social control has all had universal significance until today. It is only natural that ice and Xu Bing's works have always been of concern to the Chinese art critics. Although Xu Bing is not the only artist who focuses on the creation of the work itself, his attention to and even mobilization of public opinion is also of practical significance in a certain sense. After all, today's culture is no longer a one-way cultural accumulation. Today's contemporary art is no longer directly influenced by society alone. Art needs to find new possibilities, and art criticism needs to adapt to the speed of development. This is also the subject of contemporary art criticism.

## CHAPTER 4: THE ANALYSIS OF EXPRESSIVE FORMS OF XU BING'S NEO ENGLISH CALLIGRAPHY

### 4.1 Introduction

Neo English calligraphy, obviously, is targeted audience with English speakers as the mother tongue. It organically combines both the traditional Chinese Characters and Western letters. Basically it is putting the English alphabets into square frame of Chinese characters. The Chinese characters acted as the background, also played as the frame of reference. The concept of Neo English calligraphy is rooted in the wisdom of Chinese calligraphy but addresses common global cultural issues. Neo English calligraphy is kind of text with a mask which is made by English letters but looks like Chinese characters. Strictly speaking, it is a kind of special font design with readability and utility.<sup>35</sup> Neo English calligraphy has connected two kinds of different text system together in the human visual symbol system. It exemplifies the internationalization of artworks and cross-cultural communication. This chapter mainly analyzes the methods of materials, spelling, rhythm, structural classification and beauty appreciation of Neo English calligraphy.

### 4.2 Traditional Chinese Material- Brushes, Ink, Paper and Ink Stones

It is already been point out that the concept of Xu Bing's artwork is of the day, while the methods of implementation always has connections with things of Chinese tradition. He is using the typical Chinese way to gain modernity. Brushes, ink, paper and ink stones that traditionally used for Chinese calligraphy are a still the basic equipment for Neo English calligraphy. Owing to the use in writing of the brush, which is more subtle and more responsive than the pen, calligraphy has been raised to the true level of an art on a par with Chinese painting. Brush and ink show us a feeling of shades affordable. Neo English calligraphy also provides lasting nourishment of Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*(Routledge, 2017):2.

culture. From the point view of Xu Bing, tradition and modern are two things with magnetic field, they can converted into each other and are pairs of opposites condition one another for their existence. Neo English calligraphy brings people in the situation of thinking about relationship between modern and tradition.

He prepared tables, blackboard, brushes, ink, and paper and ink stones into a classroom which is converted by his exhibition. It is the same way of those Chinese pupils going to their classroom to learn Chinese calligraphy with the same tools. Actually, the audients were given with the introduction of Neo English calligraphy- a copybook. They used the mysterious Chinese calligraphy tools writing their readable English alphabets, but the shapes is Chinese calligraphy. Xu Bing imaged that the Neo English calligraphy recorded a progress that person fighting his mind in two different systems. From my observation, when the audiences enter the exhibition hall, they would be under the impression as though they are entering a learning institute. I think the Neo English calligraphy is a system that audiences are able to experience traditional Chinese culture in a familiar way.

#### **4.3 The Spelling Method**

Since 1994, Xu Bing began to think about his square-shaped Neo English calligraphy design.<sup>36</sup> He employed a kind of new square font that combines English alphabets with Chinese strokes. This font corresponds to 26 English alphabets and is composed of 26 basic Chinese character radicals, as shown in the following (Figure 4.1) .<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Stone, "Xu Bing and the Printed Word," *Public Culture* 6, no. 2 (1994):410.

<sup>37</sup> The letters in the squares correspond to the strokes of Chinese characters, and their writing is similar to the English letters. Among them, A, I, and T are written in two ways.

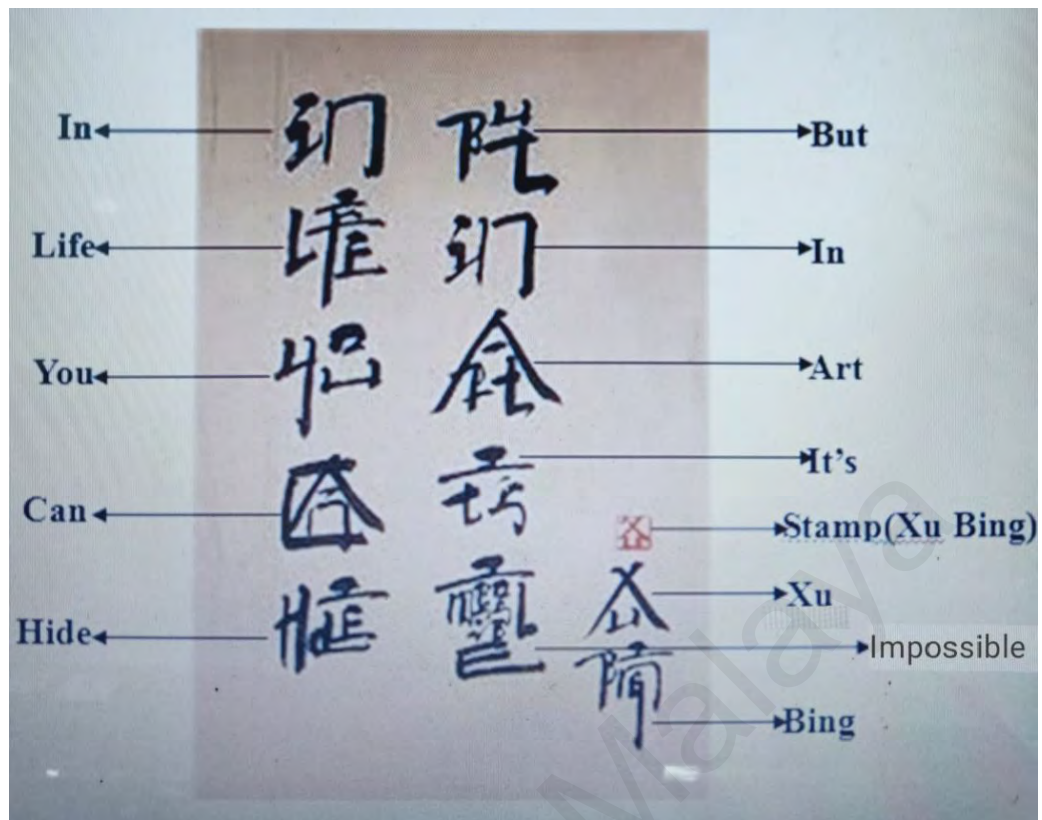


This artwork made up with Chinese strokes, English letters. People will think this is a Chinese calligraphy artwork with first look. But they will realize they don't know what exactly these characters are in their Chinese characters system. Although this type of phonetic font is pinyin, it cannot be written as a linear structure from left to right; it is usually arranged into a square.

Xu Bing has created reading method. That is you need to read accordingly: from left to right, from top to bottom, from outside to inside. Each "square word" is an English word; hence people know the meaning by understanding the readable English and they did a "Chinese Calligraphy" works as well.

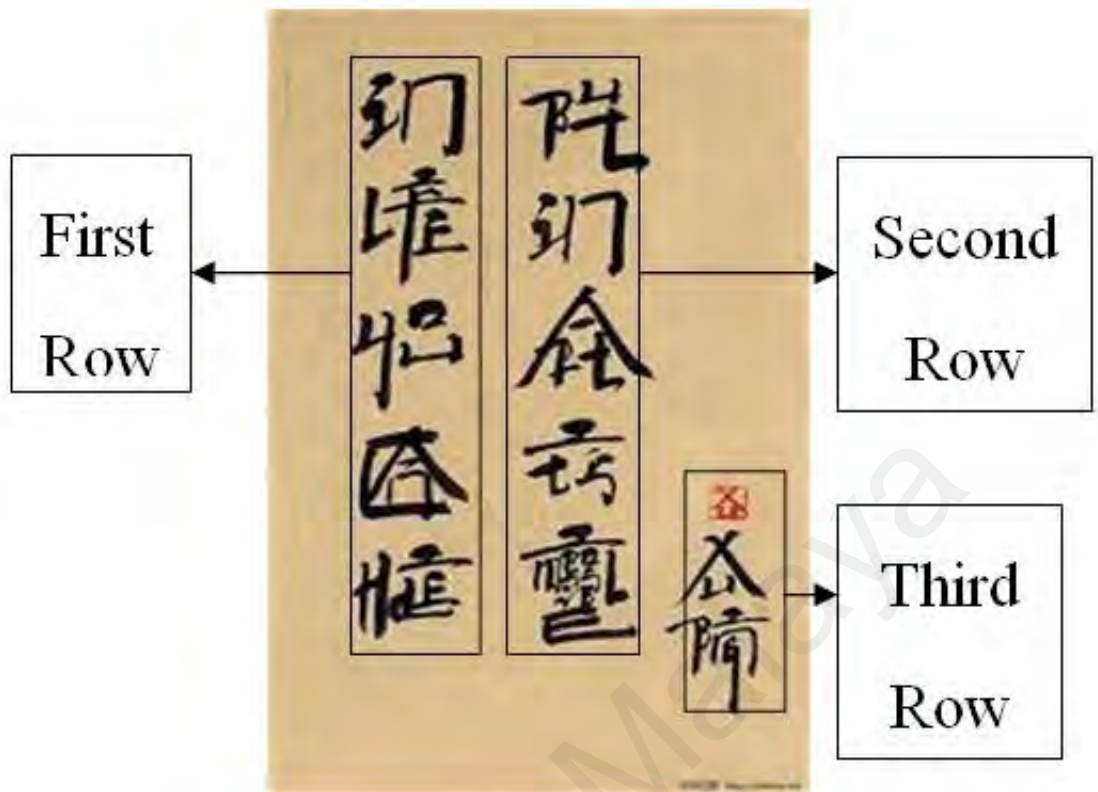
We take this Neo English calligraphy artwork (Figure 4.3) as an example, "IN LIFE YOU CAN HIDE, BUT IN ART IT'S IMPOSSIBLE". The spelling method for (IN) is from left to right; for (HIDE) and (BUT) are from left to right, then the characters for spelling method from top to bottom in the right part; (CAN) are spelled from outside to inside. In accordance with the spelling method from top to bottom; (ART) and (IT'S) are spelled from top to bottom. About the (IMPOSSIBLE), it is a bit complicated with many alphabets to be arranged in a proper way. It is a top-to-bottom spelling method, the alphabets in the middle are spelled from left to right and top to bottom as well.





**Figure 4.3 The English Calligraphy of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy "IN LIFE YOU CAN HIDE, BUT IN ART IT'S IMPOSSIBLE".**

The reading order of Neo English calligraphy artwork also followed the reading order of Chinese calligraphy which is from left to right and from top to bottom. We take the artwork of "IN LIFE YOU CAN HIDE, BUT IN ART IT'S IMPOSSIBLE" (Figure 4.4) to explain this point: the reading order is for this text is from left to right, and then the vertical line from top to bottom (first row in the figure). This is followed by the vertical row (second row in the figure) and the third vertical row is Xu Bing's signature (third row in the figure).



**Figure 4.4 Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy Work "IN LIFE YOU CAN HIDE, BUT IN ART IT'S IMPOSSIBLE" Reads in the Order is from Left to Right, and then reads the Vertical Line from Top to Bottom.**

If there are fewer words in a Neo English calligraphy artwork, it will be arranged out into a vertical row or a horizontal row, and the reading method is the same. For example: Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy work "WORD PLAY" follows the reading method from top to bottom. (Figure 4.5)



Figure 4.5 Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy Work "WORD PLAY"

Another example: Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy artwork, "WWW.ARTINTERN.NET" reads from left to right. (Figure 4.6)



**Figure 4.6 Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy "WWW.ARTINTERN.NET"**

Therefore, the Neo English calligraphy artwork is readable either for Eastern people or Western people. In short, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy system, the word is pronounced the sound of the word itself, and the meaning of the word expressed the meaning of the word itself. Here, the only thing that has changed is the shape of the word. The shape of the word followed Chinese calligraphy lines, structures and rhythm.

#### **4.4 The Writing Rhythm**

The main problems of Chinese art are problems of rhythm. Hence, we must begin with Chinese rhythm and the source of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy inspiration. It is already been point out that the concept of Xu Bing's artwork is of the time, while his angle of view is still has something with the things of Chinese tradition. As a Chinese artist and art lover, he usually rest supremely happy in the getting a fine quality of paper. He has even spent one week to decide the type of paper for his artwork of "Book from the Sky".

And curiously enough, pursuing rhythm in the abstract development of the Chinese calligraphy as an art, the learning of Chinese calligraphy is basically to study of form

and rhythm. Neo English calligraphy is basically the form of Chinese characters. An English letter was written in the structure of Chinese square character. It is exactly shaped by the elements of lines and forms in Chinese Calligraphy. Therefore, the aesthetics of Neo English calligraphy is back to the talk about Chinese art. From my observation, Neo English calligraphy has perfectly camouflaged however actually we see the "real character".

When we appreciating calligraphy artwork, can we totally ignore content of the artwork, the answer is "no". Because all we know about the master pieces of Chinese calligraphy such as the "Lan Ting Xu", "Elegiac Lament for Departed Nephew", however they are the classics in the field of literature, they expressed one's real life circumstance and unique life perception. Now, with Neo English calligraphy, western people also can create their own stories. However, in appreciating Neo English calligraphy artworks, the meaning is totally not a problem, lines and forms are appreciated as well. Forget the meaning of the calligraphy in appreciating calligraphy, the lines and forms are appreciated in and for themselves.

According to Qiu Zhenzhong, calligraphy can be seen as the art of line instead of characters of art. He point out that this process is not simply say no to the past, but should get the positive elements in the new system. Neo English calligraphy is a good example; it has solved the problem nicely. As a new concept it well kept the good nutrition of tradition such as line, structure, rhythm. All our statements here are about the transform of challenge the fixed pattern. It is to destroy our feeling with the familiarity of a single character. There is a same transform in the history of painting. When people put their feeling on the space, the rhythm, structure, they will upgrade their sensitive the quality of line, space as well as color. Neo English calligraphy

somehow would bring up the sharpness of art. And hence they will review art in a unique way.

#### **4.5 The Structure Classification**

According to the data displayed in the founder font library, there are more than 4000 total glyphs (words) of Neo English calligraphy. From a glyph point of view, the writing style and composition are similar to those of Chinese characters, but it is impossible to read through the Chinese spelling method. On the contrary, English spelling can be read. His artistic creation uses Chinese characters as the basic unit, and involves changes in the fonts and forms of letters. Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy does not completely create words that people do not know, but rather through familiar pictographs. The parts are combined with each other to form an English font that is not included in the prescription. However, people can interpret correctly by understanding the meaning of the radicals to explain the meaning of the entire "word". What Xu Bing wants to express is that he thinks that the English that expresses this meaning should be written in this way, but the actual English writing does not exist. And now we will analyses and categorize the shape of cubes in relation to their structure and gravity.

##### **(1) Structure Classification**

There are more than 4000 Neo English square shapes; its structural shapes can be divided into: single structure and two-part structure, three-part structure, four-and-more structure and surrounding structure. The following are examples of these various types:

##### **(2) Specific Analysis of Different Structures**

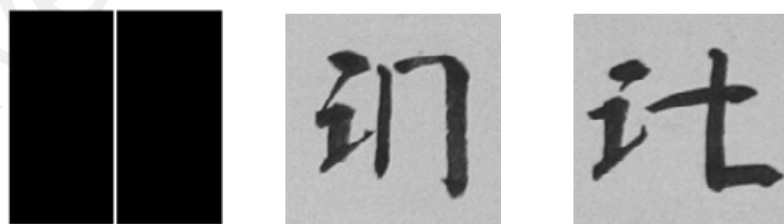
###### **a. Single Structure: (As shown in the following figure 4.7)**



**Figure 4.7 Single Structure of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**

Structurally, these two square words are a structure, and the centre of gravity should be the exact centre of the square. However, when there is no vertical stroke, the strokes of left-falling (丿 piě) and right falling (㇏ nà) may play a role in deciding the centre of gravity. Whether or not the centre of gravity is stable depends mainly on the position of the stroke. The intersection of the two places is just right. There is no rigid left and right symmetry, neither is there a vertical, which leads to the tendency of the model to "rescue the heart". The position of those "left-falling" and "right falling" are in line with people's aesthetic standards, and the centre of gravity is smooth to avoid the feeling of falling.

**b. Two-part Structures: (As shown in the following figure 4.8)**

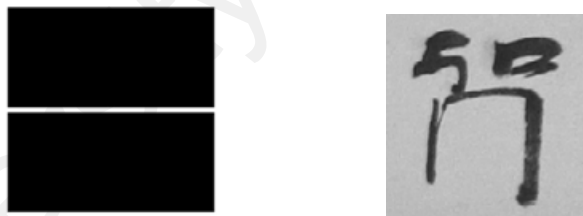


**Figure 4.8 Two-part Structures of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**

Based from the structure of these two square words that has been analysed, the shape of the first word from the linear point of view, the smoother the centre of gravity is easier, but the letter "N" on the left and right rough design on the one hand rubbed into the Chinese calligraphy. The features on the other hand combine the weights on the

right, blurring the vertical, and achieving a more balanced stability. The design of the second word is very interesting. There is a sense of rightward slant in the left part of it, but the right part of the t's horizontal stroke is intentionally elongated to the left and then thickened at the bottom of the vertical bend to support the tilt of the left part to get a sense of stability. In terms of overall composition, this type of left and right bipartite structure is originally completely separated by two letters in English. In linear English, the sense of integrity is obtained by spacing apart words from other words, such as "in the" or "in hand". In class, Xu Bing reconstructed the use of the method of focusing on Chinese characters. It can be said that this novel idea is to achieve English Chinese characters through the design of the centre of gravity.

As for the words without vertical centre in the upper and lower parts, it is felt that there is an invisible vertical centre under the dominance of the mind. (As shown in the following figure 4.9)



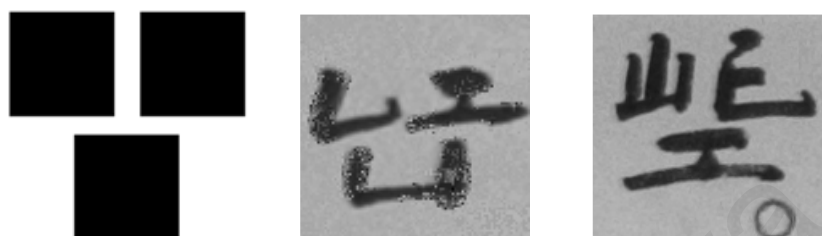
**Figure 4.9 The Upper to Lower Parts of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**

When the right and left sides of the font are vertical, the invisible centre is vertically in the middle of two vertical columns. This invisible centre is the basis for our judgment of the stable centre of gravity of this word. In the form of the upper and lower parts, the upper part has more "quality" and the lower part is composed of two vertical parts. In terms of "quality", although the upper seems like heavier than the lower part, the lower part consists of two vertical strokes is sufficient to make the centre of gravity

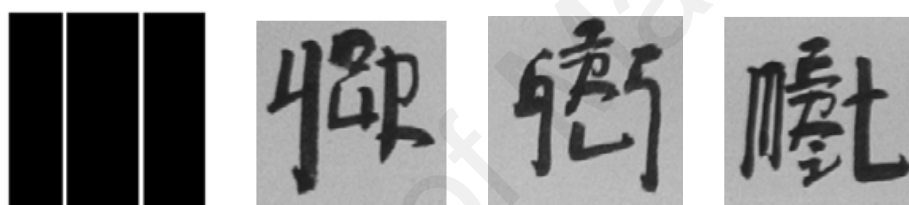


stable. The distance between left and right vertical is sufficient to make the centre of gravity stable.

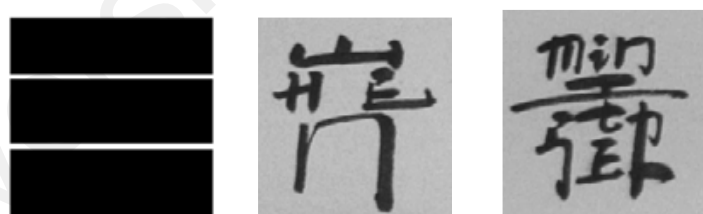
**c. Three-part Structures: (As shown in the following in figure 4.10, 4.11, 4.12)**



**Figure 4.10 Similar the Scales Structure of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**



**Figure 4.11 The Center Line is Strong and Powerful Structure of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**



**Figure 4.12 Above to Middle and Below Structure of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**

When the upward chart is centred, the principle of the centre of gravity of the square word is similar to that of the scales, and the "weight" of the upper part should be approximately equal (figure 4.10). When the centre line is strong and powerful, the weight on both sides is somewhat divided, but it does not affect the sense of balance. Just like a big tree, a few hundred pounds of weight on some of its branches, would still render the tree as stable (figure 4.11). The lower glyphs (figure 4.12) are "above to

middle and below" when referring to the structure of Chinese character, and the upper structure is supported by the lower structure. The middle structure is slightly wider than the upper and lower structures, and serves as a link between the upper and lower structures and balances the weight of the entire character.

**d. Four-part Structures: (As shown in the following in figure 4.13, 4.14)**



**Figure 4.13 The First Type of Four-Part Structures of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**



**Figure 4.14 The Second Type of Four-part Structures of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**

This structure has the internal dense characteristics of the stroke of left falling and right falling in the middle and horizon and vertical in the bottom. The shape is more squares for the "weight" of the top and bottom is equal. The word of the first type is separated into the upper and lower parts by stroke of left falling and right falling. The intersection of the stroke of left falling and right falling, serves as the centre of gravity for the entire block. The left and right asymmetrical forms of the stroke of left falling and right falling make this square character more aesthetically pleasing. The structures of the second type are upper heavier lower lighter. The upper part of the "weight" is

relatively concentrated. But the stroke of horizon at the bottom part makes the centre of gravity of the entire shape to be steady.

**e. Surrounding structure: (As shown in the following in Figure 4.15, 4.16)**



**Figure 4.15 The First Type of the Surrounding Structure of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**



**Figure 4.16 The Second type of the Surrounding Structure of Xu Bing's Neo English Calligraphy**

The surrounding structure encloses the "weight" at the middle, with the stroke of horizontal and vertical at the bottom, making the centre of gravity stable. The shape of Non-surrounding structure is not rigid.

From the above brief analysis, it can be seen that the overall characteristics of the five structures of the Neo English calligraphy are box-shaped and the prominent feature is stability. The centre of gravity of the structure can be found in each glyph. This structural centre of gravity reinforces the stability of the overall shape. According to Qiu Zhenzhong, through the analysis of the aesthetic orientation of photography composition, "man needs a sense of stability which is determined by his inner needs.

Therefore, 'striving to be stable' is also a visual requirement of the people and enables people to obtain visual stability and comfort".<sup>38</sup>

#### 4.6 The Aesthetics of Neo English Calligraphy

In essence, the aesthetic concept of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy works derives from the cultural background of the East and the West. It has not only become a symbol of the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art, but has also been applied to real life.<sup>39</sup> For example, some stores in western countries are beginning to use the Neo English font as the shop name. (Figure 4.17 and 4.18)



**Figure 4.17 Appeared in Advertisement**

<sup>38</sup> Zhen-Zhong Qiu, *the Form and Interpretation of Calligraphy* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 1993):132.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Solomon, "Xu Bing (Excerpt)," *National Art Museum of China*, no. 9 (2010):96.



**Figure 4.18 Appeared in Shop Name**

This demonstrates that the aesthetic characteristics are recognized by society and are popular with the people. Xu Bing has been subverting all kinds of habitual cognitive systems and modes of thinking through words, from the original classics, classics and academic models, to the simple, cute styles of today.<sup>40</sup> He tried to infuse the works with practical value and social functions, by eliminating the burden of cultural composition, in hopes of trying to change people's way of thinking. The Neo English calligraphy, through its forms and functions, reason and emotions, is a very traditional yet very basic and classic aesthetic-filled thing that gives people rhythm and spirit.<sup>41</sup> With the help of the communication and appeal of contemporary art, a new model is created through the artist's wisdom and participation. As a work of art, its shape design and centre-of-gravity planning meet the common aesthetic requirements of East and West. Through

<sup>40</sup> Juan Run, "[Xu Bing: Art Is Fatalistic]."153.

<sup>41</sup> Peng, "[Focus Analysis of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy Style]."5

this unique creativity that enables Westerners to really begin to understand the beauty of calligraphy art in an easier way.

From the point of view, Xu Bing's Neo English symbol is based on a box shape. The linear character of English letters is embedded in them, and interpreted in accordance with reading rules from left to right, from top to bottom, and from outside to inside. It is a unique art form that integrates with English and is embedded with each other. Li Peng said that "because the visual symbol has the visual and imaginative nature of the image, it has the natural advantage of cross-cultural communication".<sup>42</sup> The creation of the square shape also depends on the people's own aesthetic psychology. The first is square thinking. Since ancient times, the sky was considered round and the ground was square; so there was a saying of heaven and earth. The land is square in the eyes of the ancients, and it forms a big square in the east and west. The styling is undoubtedly adapted to the characteristics of the ancient people's psychological model and also in line with people's unique aesthetic habits. The shape of the square block is generally stable. From a planar geometric point of view, the square's stability is from a triangle. From an aesthetic view point, stability becomes the common aesthetic orientation of humans, whether in the East or in the West.

From an emotional point of view, the Neo English calligraphy applied the features of Chinese and English fonts. When Westerners see the new writing arrangements and changes of English alphabets, they would undoubtedly be inspired, activated and attracted. When Asians see familiar and unfamiliar combinations of Chinese strokes, they would undoubtedly be jolted to a state of pensive reflection. This familiar language stimulated people's senses, thus triggering an emotional thought process. For this reason

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Xu Bing opines that people's emotional attraction to Neo English calligraphy is a new starting point for this work to reach the entire world.

In short, Neo English calligraphy is a brand-new art form. By combining Chinese traditional hieroglyphs with Western phonetic texts to form English fonts in the form of Chinese characters, it serves to replace English alphabets with Chinese characters which are to give the Chinese characters a special "Western Beauty".<sup>43</sup> Xu Bing's English-language-based English calligraphy works allow viewers to further understand the essential concepts and cultural meanings of Chinese characters behind the words. As a higher-level artistic attitude playing a certain role in people's aesthetic sense, they serve as a guided and normative role.

#### **4.7 Xu Bing's Representative Work in Neo English Calligraphy**

##### **4.7.1 Appreciation of the Artwork: "ART FOR THE PEOPLE"**

###### **a. "ART FOR THE PEOPLE" Innovative Analysis**

"ART FOR THE PEOPLE" is an application of English calligraphy. In 1999, Xu Bing applied his Neo English calligraphy to Mao Zedong's famous saying "Art for the People" with a huge slogan. On a red banner, the computer printed "ART FOR THE PEOPLE" is spotted with large yellow letters. Four characters of Neo English calligraphy are displayed at the entrance of the MOMA Museum of Art in New York.<sup>44</sup>

(Figure 4.19):

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<sup>43</sup> Xian Jin, "[Research on Public Appeal of Xu Bing's Works]."6

<sup>44</sup> Xiao Yu, "[Xu Bing: "Art for the People"]."





**Figure 4.19 "ART FOR THE PEOPLE" in Neo English Calligraphy**

"Art for the People" - This is the most fundamental idea of Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art".<sup>45</sup> Xu Bing kept this deeply in mind. He repeatedly emphasized to the people the slogan, seemingly missionary color. However, this is his true belief. Xu Bing thinks that not only is his artistic creation helpful in the introspection of the national character, the philosophical view and wisdom in the cultural genes, but it is also beneficial to the people who grew up in the Chinese mainland who seek the socialist road, as well as to these who experience a collision with Western ideas. This constitutes the nourishment of its Neo English calligraphy creation,

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



laying a solid spiritual foundation for the emergence of Neo English calligraphy and the spread of international coverage.

“ Art for the People” embodies the nationality and culture of the Chinese calligraphy. Written as the "art for the people" in Neo English fonts, it shows people publicly an attempt to integrate calligraphy into the era. This is more in line with the Western Human aesthetics and culture. Regardless of the purposes, Westerners have come to recognize the value of Neo English calligraphy. Neo English calligraphy is the integration of Chinese characters and English letters, which in itself has promoted the spread of Chinese calligraphy. The opinion of the public will subtly influence the artist's creation, and the artist's works will more or less decide the audience's aesthetic orientation. This mutual influence, results in the production of contemporary art we see today. Today, the artist has increased his popularity through expanding the audience of his works by reporting via the media industry. "If an artwork is not recognized by the public, it is actually considered worthless. So, the recognition of the public today is very important for artists. This is one of the reasons why Xu Bing has always flaunted art as the people." Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is a blend of two different fonts. It seems absurd and there are no rules to follow. However, it appears to be very structured. This point is more in line with the requirements of calligraphy art, and it also highlights the seriousness of the works. The sense of art, which cannot be quantified nor understood, does not mean that it is bad or wrong. Similarly, just as western countries consider Chinese characters hard to learn and difficult to use correctly, this does not in any way lessen the profoundness of Chinese culture, because, Chinese characters and the art of calligraphy are all present there objectively. The “character” in the works not only has the appearance structure of the characters, but also is given a substantial meaning. Although this seems absurd, it is in some ways a direct expression of a bold innovation in calligraphy.

## **b. Xu Bing's Investigation of the Concept of "Art for the People"**

Xu Bing has stated in many places that he has two sources of his creation: Chinese traditional culture and what he got from the Mao Zedong era. In particular, Mao's thought provided him with the artistic idea of "art and artists should go closer to the public".<sup>46</sup> In addition, Xu Bing also stick to the concept "get closer to the public" and "Art for the People". This is the marks of Xu Bing of the collectivist thought from that era. This potential collectivist thought has made Xu Bing tend to choose some folk materials with public in his creation. At the same time, the word of "Art for the People" is a work itself. Together with "Mao Zedong's Speech at the Yan'an forum on Literature and Art" have been written in the form of Neo English calligraphy. The Neo English calligraphy artwork "Art for the People" is a huge banner hanging at the door of MOMA in New York. With yellow text on the red bottom one is hard to ignore. The "speech" is the biggest and most important piece of my work, said Xu Bing. The firmness and his artistic philosophy and his artistic attitude are firmly reflected in this work.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the achievements of Neo English calligraphy in artistic language, the two artworks seem to call out for his idea of creation and even made people suspecting that it is a strategy to position socialist identity.

Contemporary art has two directions in its aesthetic tendency: one direction is to inherit the criticality of modern art, such as Xu Bing's "Book from the Sky"; the other is based on popular culture, and even aims to smooth the difference between elegance and popular culture, such as Xu Bing's "Book from the Ground", hence we see the experiments at both directions.<sup>48</sup> Whatever kind of aesthetic tendency is displayed in the works or the mutual change both of tendencies are guided by the artist's creative

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<sup>46</sup> Katie Scott, "Xu Bing and "Art for the People" the Effect Mao's Maxim Had on the Art of Xu Bing,"5.

<sup>47</sup> Bing Xu, ["Xinyingwen Shufa-Mao Zhedong zai yanan wenyi zuotanhui shangde jianghua", "Neo English calligraphy-Chairman Mao's talking in the literary symposium of Yanan"], no.2:(2010):5

<sup>48</sup> Mathieu Borysevicz, *The Book About Xu Bing's Book from the Ground*(2014).3.

concept. Xu Bing's "Book from the Sky ", Neo English calligraphy language series and "Book from the Ground" series are important nodes in the artist's creative career. In addition to the innovation and breakthrough of the three in artistic language, their transformation is gradually realizing the artist's artistic concept and a complete text experiment system. "Book from the Sky" has a special effect on intellectuals. However the lethality is not so strong for those uneducated or low-educated."<sup>49</sup>At that time, the works still could not get rid of the high intellectual atmosphere. The traditional aristocratic tendency of Chinese literati--- Xu Bing is closest to the concept of "Art for the People" and has drawn closer to the works of the elite in the distance of the public. Although he himself argued that the concept of inheritance from "Book from the Sky" to "Book from the Ground" is: "the two books look very different with first sight but actually they have something in common. No matter what language you speak or whether you are educated, they treat everyone equally in the world".<sup>50</sup> But it is obvious that the "Book from the Ground" is approachable. The two straightforwardly named Neo English calligraphy series mentioned above can be said the transitional stage of art for the practice of the people's concept, and more of the topic and practicality of on Xu Bing's Neo English language model.

The artwork "Book from the Ground" series is a stage representative of Xu Bing's artistic creation in 2006, which was collected as a medium. The work is completely out of linear text and its writing meaning, and becomes a completely symbolized and graphical "language" with communication function. This is fundamentally different from other contemporary art. The latter often puts forward certain requirements for the audience. On one hand, the public must have a certain understanding of the development of modern and contemporary art; on the other hand, one should focus on

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<sup>49</sup> Shi Bai "[Research on Xu Bing's Book of Heaven]."(2015).14

<sup>50</sup> Borysevicz, *The Book About Xu Bing's Book from the Ground*.8.

the life of the artist to get a better understanding of the artwork. "Book from the Ground" series gives people the feeling of affable, which tells a story that anyone with any cultural background can read,<sup>51</sup> the pattern of "Book from the Ground" make people to think the "emoji" expression in the internet conversation. This kind of communication in life can completed with the dialogue and emotional expression. Xu Bing captured the emergence of a large number of icon languages in the process of global integration and used the idea of "one language in the world" to render and surround the form. The work "Book from the Ground" can make everyone in the world understood. This is a complete expression of "Art for the People".

The artwork "Phoenix" aims to express a kind of social reality. Some critics have put forward more stringent conditions: "The problem now is not that there are many artists paying attention to reality and much art socialization however there are less artists and less artworks focusing on the suffering of society".<sup>52</sup> Then, Xu Bing's other series of works "Forest Project" seem to meet the "too few" of the mentioned critics. It not only touched the boundaries of art but also more concerned on social issues. By selling the artworks that students participating in the project really helped Kenya to raise funds for afforestation to improve the environment of our world. Art is involved in a specific social scene and becomes an artistic complex that connected people, repaired social bonds, stimulated dialogue as well as enhanced mutual recognition. In the sociological dimension, the awareness of cooperation and participation emphasized in this kind of interventional art has led to contemporary people's deep thoughts on "speaking" and "reconstructing the community". It is forming a symbiotic relationship between the artist, the scene and the audience. Xu Bing mentioned that the original intention of the "Forest Project" was planned that the participation of artists could play a

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bing Zhou, "[Analysis of the World, Five Solutions]." 18

role in the local population for a long time. However, it is difficult for the plan of "Forest Project" to be fully carried out, because it's complex to use traditional art forms with single installation art or performance art. The plan is a social project that does not aim at art appreciation by a group of people and artists gathered together the contents of environmental protection, education, and artistic reproduction. It is carried out in public places. It is not only a solid shape but also a behavioral process. This process is accompanied by public interaction and participation. These works have become a tool for social communication. Under the artist's design, the audience is involved in the most direct way and intervenes in the results, which provides a good way for the artist to transform the world. However, because of the intervening nature, artists can easily pay attention to their social effectiveness, while ignoring the aesthetic effectiveness. Then, is the "Art for the People" of true contemporary art at the expense of the touch of aesthetic emotion? In addition, can the attribute of the public in the completion of the work be equal to the concept of "Art for the People"? Obviously, there is an intersection between the two and also a difference, what is more, the "Forest Project" plan is a half-proposition composition from the original intention and concept. So, does it mean that "Art for the People" is doing the art for the people sincerely? From the expression and quantitative proportion of Xu Bing's important works of art, I believe that the answer is yes. Xu Bing's art is enough in terms of close to the public. The artwork "Art for the People" has achieved more emotional output. It has improved the level of aesthetic education in the context of contemporary art.

#### **4.7.2 Appreciation of the Artwork of "Birds Flying"**

In 2002, Xu Bing created the Neo English calligraphy artwork: "Birds Flying" (Figure 4.20):



**Figure 4.20 "Birds Flying"**

"Birds Flying" is an exciting innovation made by Xu Bing to explore the relationship between Chinese, English, "Neo English", characters and images. It involves not only the representation system of Chinese traditional culture; Chinese characters and the characterization system of western culture, the study of the relationship between the alphabet, and combined with his attempts to change the Chinese and Western mental models represented by these two types of writing systems, the principle of Neo English, and the two texts and images. The mutual integration of the world's systems allows the viewer's thinking to linger between concepts, meanings, texts, and shapes. Through this concept that artists have embedded in popular forms, people can clearly see the transition between them and how the transition is completed.

The Neo English version of "Bird Flying" made a change in the form of "bird". The "bird" is represented by its English word BIRD, but it is not a simple English word. As a Neo English calligraphy form, we can clearly see how the "BIRD" in the English version of the English version of the "Bird Flies" exhibition transitions in the form of a Neo English language and eventually transforms it into a real one. The image of "Bird"

is relatively close, and it has a special modality similar to the traditional pictographic Chinese character "Bird". The English word "BIRD" was taken from the interpretation of the English Dictionary of "BIRD" on the ground and gradually was changed into a combination of Neo English in the process of "flying" outdoors. The letter "B" was on the left, "I" , "R" and "D" are arranged in the order of upper-middle and lower in the combination, and at the same time, the letter "D" becomes lowercase "d", and finally becomes the claw of the "bird", and the arc-shaped part of the letter "B" moves upward, and finally becomes "bird". On the head and neck, the letter "I" was stretched the upper and lower horizontal lines on the basis of the original letter form, and finally it became the "bird" wings. After undergoing a deformation process, "R" tilted slightly to the left and became the back of the "bird". In this way, during the transition from English to Neo English, the "bird" was feathered into a "real" bird at the moment it was about to "fly" out of the window, and in the form of a Chinese character similar to a Chinese pictogram image.

In this way, through a "bird-flying" action, Xu Bing accomplished a clever trick between the Chinese characters of Chinese characters and Western alphabets, between abstract characters and concrete images, and between "Neo English" and Chinese and Western languages. Xu Bing's "Bird Flying" Neo English calligraphy works are easy to understand, intuitive and standardized, with rich meanings that symbolize the free pursuit of the art of calligraphy. It is a collision of Chinese and Western cultures and ideas.

#### **4.8 Summary**

Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has a total font of more than 4000 types, focusing on the structure classification, aesthetic, reading and other aspects thus imbuing Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy with a special form of expression. Xu

Bing's Neo English calligraphy as a kind of Chinese and Western fusion of "word culture" or "word element", created a traditional Chinese culture in the international scene. Many people thought that the Neo English calligraphy and Chinese characters created by Xu Bing are not the same, but it has been chased and learned by many people. This demonstrates that Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy system can be certainly accepted by people.

University of Malaya



## **CHAPTER 5: THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF XU BING'S NEO ENGLISH**

### **CALLIGRAPHY**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

When Xu Bing's English Calligraphy also known as the "Noble Price for the United States of America" in 1997 won the MacArthur Award he was widely recognized, as having the ability to be original, to think and be intuitive in calligraphy and printmaking, thereby making important contributions to society. In the eyes of Westerners, Neo English calligraphy is a fusion of English elements and Chinese characters. It transcends the boundaries of culture and is a special embodiment of the integration of Chinese and Western languages, calligraphy, culture, art, and ideology. Neo English calligraphy is a bold innovation. Although it is full of controversy as to whether Neo English calligraphy belongs to the real calligraphy art, purely from the perspective of artistic creation and cultural communication, Neo English calligraphy is undoubtedly advancing with time, with high artistic and aesthetic values. Neo English calligraphy follows the basic rules of "traversing, arranging, erecting, arranging, and pointing" of traditional Chinese characters, and incorporates the normative of English writing. It has strong ideographic and aesthetic characteristics. Neo English calligraphy has been "criticized" by some experts and scholars in China, and even labelled as "pseudo-calligraphy". However, whether Neo English calligraphy is modern calligraphy and calligraphy art or not will not be the subject of predication in this research, at least it can be seen that it has had huge impact on society.

#### **5.2 There is Discussions of Neo English Calligraphy can be considered as Chinese Calligraphy or Not in China**

Before discussing the impact of Neo English calligraphy, we should state out that the criticism of Neo English calligraphy should not consider as Chinese calligraphy and also stated my own view.

Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy artwork is one of the hot topics in China. There are quite a number of Chinese calligraphers criticize Neo English calligraphy should not consider Chinese calligraphy, because it lack of the support of Chinese philosophy of tradition cultural Chinese calligraphy. Also it does not follow the way of Chinese calligraphy in the writing. Actually, I agree that this point of view is not significant, because Neo English calligraphy embodied some elements of traditional philosophy of Chinese calligraphy, however it does not mean it is the whole thing, should not conclude that it is "fake" Chinese calligraphy because it didn't follow the writing method. Neo English calligraphy is created as a thing; certainly creativity should not the same with tradition. From my point of view: One cannot compare the tradition with creativity. Tradition is accumulated by thousands of years that accepted by public. However, innovative things are new things. Neo English calligraphy as a new thing is attempting to challenge tradition; people need to understand it with an open mind. I agree that the connection of Chinese calligraphy and English letters was set up because of Neo English calligraphy. It has upgraded the dimension of letter word and save the space for letter word.

On the other hand, from the perspective of spreading of Chinese culture, Neo English calligraphy is popular in school and welcomed by the students. When students are learning English words they can practice calligraphy as well. Hence, they become familiar with Chinese culture starting from calligraphy. For example, then will be try to know things about Chinese painting as a sister art of Chinese calligraphy as well. Hence, Chinese calligraphy or Chinese art set a basic for people to enter to the world of Chinese culture.

### **5.3 The contemporary reception of Neo English Calligraphy in the world**

Responding to the reassertion of transcultural creation in the twentieth century in the form of character, this unique combination has challenged the way of thinking in the modern world. Xu Bing begins by changing the current system of Calligraphy by combine the existing English alphabets into something similar Chinese calligraphy -- a change that requires relinquishing the formulaic tradition. She continues with a discussion of the adaptability of this system to new character situations, including cultural and linguistic change.

#### **5.3.1 The Influence of Neo English Calligraphy in Western Countries**

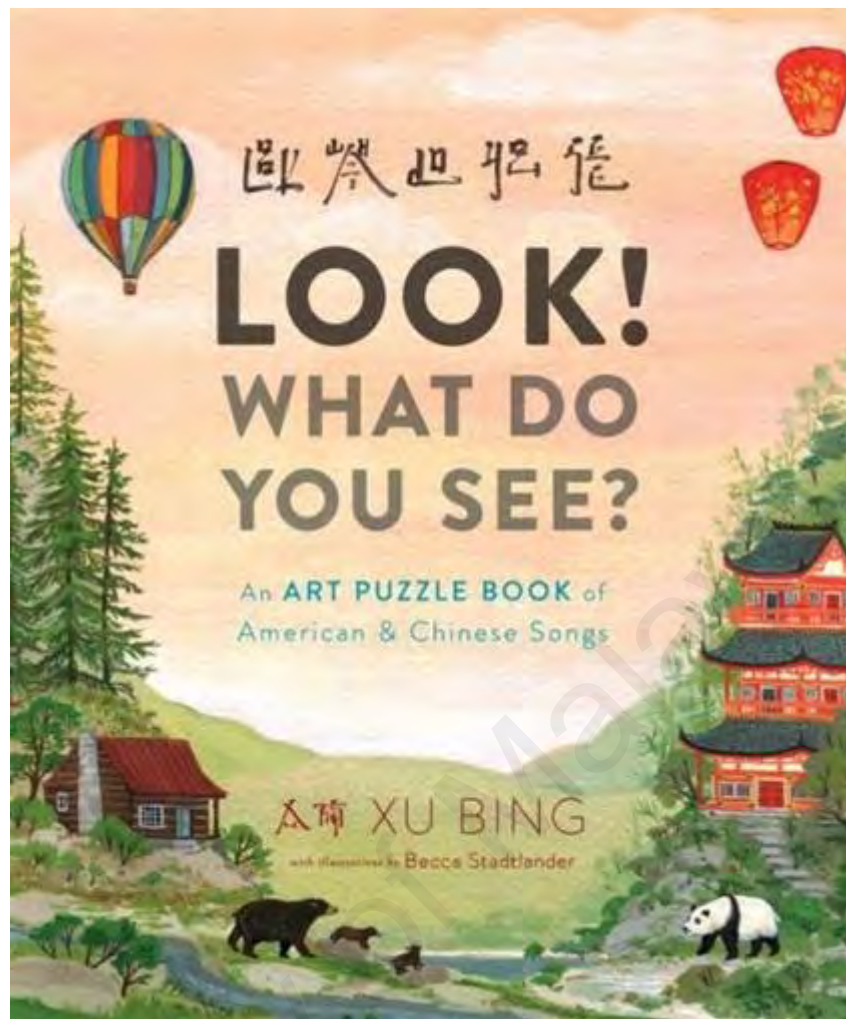
With the development of China's economy and the overall national growth, the external radiation effects and influence of culture will be inevitable. Calligraphy, as one of the representatives of Chinese traditional culture has been gaining worldwide recognition in recent years, especially with the creation of Neo English calligraphy created. The position of Chinese calligraphy in the history of world's art is unique, representing the purest principles of rhythm and composition. However, Chinese calligraphy of which the spelling and writing for foreigners is always difficult and complicated. In addition, the existence of various calligraphy types such as cursive script, official script, and regular script even increased the difficulty. To allow foreigners to understand Chinese characters, accept Chinese characters, they must choose a medium that can be accepted by both Chinese and Western people. Neo English calligraphy is undoubtedly well positioned to solve this problem.

As a work of art, Neo English calligraphy establishes a bridge for Chinese and Western cultures, evoking the resonance of two cultures, where phonetic texts and hieroglyphs converge. Neo English calligraphy, not only become the symbol of the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art, but also become the conjunction point

between Chinese and English.<sup>53</sup> Xu Bing has especially achieved great success in the western region and is well represented in New York. For example, his artwork was hanging at the entrance of V&A museum in London (see figure 4.19). Do kids accept Neo English calligraphy? Xu Bing's unique "square word calligraphy", was applied in an innovative book named "Look! What Do You See? An Art Puzzle Book of American and Chinese Songs". (Figure 5.1) The Neo English calligraphy was called magic code as an art of puzzle. Every page of the book is filled with magic code. It looks like Chinese calligraphy of the book of introduction, but it's not. It looks like you can't understand it, but you can. Once the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place, you will fully understand. And some of it may even strike you as strangely familiar. Seen from a distance, these works are beautiful but difficult to understand art. Up close, they are a mystery waiting to be solved -- like an artistic version of the magic eye. And this is a book adult and children will read again and again. Hence, we will conclude that the reception of Neo English calligraphy is very well received.

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<sup>53</sup> Stanley K Abe, "No Questions, No Answers: China and a Book from the Sky," *Boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998):169.



**Figure 5.1 An Art Puzzle Book written in Neo English calligraphy**

Western people who are interested in calligraphy but have limited access to calligraphy will now get to learn about calligraphy through Neo English calligraphy. In the process of spelling and writing Neo English calligraphy, Westerners are creating their own writing and now being able to generate calligraphy art with western influence.

Art is infinite and borderless, and good works of art may reach consensus across cultural boundaries. Neo English calligraphy has brought people rhythm, spirituality through the centre of gravity and structure. This is as very traditional yet basic and classic aesthetic form. With the help of the communication and appeal of contemporary art, a new model is created through the artist's wisdom and participation. As a work of art, its shape and centre of gravity are in line with the common aesthetic characteristics

of the East and West. It is this commonality of creative incitement that has enabled Westerners to really begin to understand the beauty of calligraphy. Xu Bing said: “Westerners are interested in (Chinese) calligraphy, but they can’t really enter the realm of appreciation of calligraphy. Without knowing the Chinese words, they can only be understood as drawings. In this way, I really brought calligraphy art to the West. This work is to let them write their own words, have their own calligraphy, and expand their thinking. I did not teach you to write, but let you reflect on your existing knowledge.”<sup>54</sup>

Actually, Chinese calligraphy is deeply embedded in the plane structure of Chinese characters. From my observation, it seems that the spirit of Western art is more to artist’s own ego, while the spirit Chinese art is more chastened, more restrained and more in harmony with nature. Through calligraphy, the Chinese scholars or writers are trained to appreciate, such as lines, qualities like force, suppleness, reversed strength, exquisite tenderness, neatness, swiftness, massiveness and restraint or freedom; and for as to form. Hence, the two may express this difference by using Neo English calligraphy.

### **5.3.2 The Influence of Neo English Calligraphy in Asian Countries**

With the increase of China’s overall national strength, Chinese traditional culture, especially calligraphy, has spread rapidly in many Asian countries and regions. As the researcher points out, Neo English calligraphy is a kind of text with masks. Strictly speaking, it is a special kind of font design that is both readable and common. In short, Xu Bing’s Neo English calligraphy provides a new channel for people to understand, understand and apply Chinese. The Neo English calligraphy has experimentally combined two of the most nationalistic scripts in the human visual symbol system, providing an important example for the internationalization and cross-cultural communication of works of art, namely the languages of different countries and regions.

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<sup>54</sup> Adam Jarworski, "Xu Bing's Transformative Art of Language," *Xu Bing: It begins with metamorphosis*. Hong Kong: Asia Society Hong Kong (2014):85.

Calligraphy art is likely to remain for a considerable amount of time. Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is recognized in the West and its successful adaption and appreciation would be inevitable. However, the influence of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy in Asian countries is a far cry from its impact on western countries. As Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy design is based on the combination of 26 English letters and symbols written in Chinese characters, most Asian countries are non-native English speakers. This type of interactive integration is not highly recognized by Asian countries.

However, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy also has a certain influence in a few countries in Asia. For example, many of his Neo English calligraphy works have been exhibited in Asia, Japan and South Korea, and they have achieved good results and effect. Xu Bing persists in using local culture as a means to explain the cultural collisions and exchanges between different countries, regions, and nations in Asia. While emphasizing the artificial technicality of art, he also brings unique experiences in personal life into his artistic creation. Finally, this kind of experience was given back to the public through art, creating Neo English calligraphy, realizing the value of life, and erecting a banner that is close to the people and sharp-minded for the development of contemporary Chinese art, and for artists and people in Asian countries to understand Chinese traditional calligraphy culture and art have built a good platform. The case study of Xu Bing can make people aware of the profoundness of Chinese contemporary art.<sup>55</sup> While insisting on strengthening their own professional skills, they can treat other countries' culture more objectively and use their own national culture as their "ideological weapon". He takes it seriously upon himself ensuring that people are not blinded and misled by the pecuniary interest. He wants people to really understand the true meaning of Chinese calligraphy art and calligraphy culture.

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<sup>55</sup> Jin-Xian Zhang, "[Research on Public Appeal of Xu Bing's Works]."2.

Xu Bing has carried Chinese calligraphy in a global level beyond regional histories and cultural symbols.<sup>56</sup> Neo English calligraphy can be considering as a new hybrid of language and we find that this unique system successfully adopted in education area and it will be appeared in a broader area in the future.

#### **5.4 Neo English Calligraphy causes concern**

Neo English is something that never seen before appeared in the world. Its appearance has broadened people's horizons and caused discussion. One of the discussions is that Neo English Calligraphy Do Helps Westerns to Appreciate and Learning Chinese Culture or not, this is a good question which we will expand in the next session. Another one is that this innovation as a creation, it deserves recognition, the second question of its Originality will be analysis here.

##### **5.4.1 Question that Neo English Calligraphy Do Helps Westerns to Appreciate and Learning Chinese Culture**

It has already pointed out that Neo English calligraphy should be considering Chinese calligraphy. So when learning Neo English calligraphy they will learn the spirit of Chinese calligraphy as well.

The spirit of Chinese calligraphy is more chastened and more in harmony with nature. Harmony with nature is the typical feature of Chinese culture. From my observation, western art is more to the artist self. One will feel the enormous difference. There is a saying that one can only understand Chinese calligraphy, when one's eye has been opened to the form and rhythm inherent in every animal's body. Every animal body has a harmony and beauty. In other words, one will get the spirit of Chinese calligraphy and hence Chinese culture by learning the lines and forms of Neo English calligraphy.

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<sup>56</sup> Sarah E. Fraser, "Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky."2.



Art of calligraphy provides a whole set of terms of appreciation which we may consider as the bases of Chinese notions of beauty. As the art of Chinese calligraphy has a history well-high two thousand years ago. There is a system for one to appreciate calligraphy in the Chinese artistic mind. Certain types such as the worship of beauty of irregularity that yet keep its balance are the necessary content of Chinese culture. What is significance to westerners is the fact that calligraphy has the provided the aesthetic basis for Chinese art. And it also presents an animistic principle which may be most fruitful results when understood.

Every culture has its own values, what we can do is to show the advantage of the certain culture. Neo English Calligraphy is similar to Chinese calligraphy art in the looks. It opens the horizon of westerners to see something that comes from Chinese calligraphy. Xu Bing created Neo English Calligraphy is to relieve the awkwardness of living in New York between two different cultures. Did he make it successful? From the appearing of his Neo English Calligraphy in public and hot discussions about his character games we can confirm that this new system is successful. The certain Chinese elements appeared in western countries and they can recognize it and use it. This is the best illustration blending of Chinese and Western cultures. Moreover, The English Calligraphy series (up to now) further reconstructs. The English in the form of Chinese calligraphy, and this "defamiliarization" processing method also implies the new Arrival in New York. However, artists' thinking on the nature of language communication seems to reach reconciliation between China and the West. It presents the strange appearance of the grafting and fusion of Chinese and Western cultural genes, and at the same time, it makes people old concept of knowledge forced into a loss of judgment fulcrum.

#### 5.4.2 Questioning about the Originality of Xu Bing's Art

"Xu Bing Phenomenon" comes from the extensive discussion of his artwork of "Book from the Sky", while not all these comments are positive. After the new wave of art, contemporary art practice began to look for artistic expressions adapted to the local mood while learning from western art. At this period, the concept of "Chinese character art" was proposed. "Chinese Character Art" is a model that uses all or part of the sound, shapes or the meaning of Chinese characters to create art. The use of Chinese characters as a new element of visual art creation enhances the recognition of words as visual materials. The producer of the text becomes an artist. This artistic process reflects the artist's attempt and exploration of the new artistic vocabulary. Xu Bing's "Text" language is such a kind of concept. Employing the "Chinese Characters" elements for artistic creation, Xu Bing is certainly not the only one. Xu's artworks were compared with other artist's artworks of the same period, such as the "Pseudo-Text" works of Gu Wenda and Wu Shanzhuan. The method of artistic processing of Chinese characters is a reference for interpreting the artistic language of Xu Bing's artworks. Wang Lin pointed out that "Xu Bing's typo art comes from Gu Wenda's 'Text Series' and Wu Shanzhuan's 'Red Humor'".<sup>57</sup> However, Wang's statement started a discussion about the originality of Xu Bing creation in the "text" elements.

Here, the definition of originality is in terms of the form of expression of the work, and does not involve the ideas and techniques contained in the work. Xu Bing's work has been influenced by other people; however in my opinion the speculation of its form source cannot dissolve its originality. Wang Lin said: The development of modern Chinese art requires more original creativity rather than just absorbing opinions from others.<sup>58</sup> Although his statement has denied the original creativity of Xu Bing's text

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<sup>57</sup> Lin Wong, "[Xu Bing Art: Another Drinking Bear]," *Jiangsu Pictorial* 2(1990):21.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

artworks, but he actually has point out that Xu, Wu and Gu are differ in the expression of creativity. In fact, Wu and Gu's works have a stronger form of beauty and emotional color and they are not separated from the traditional writing, it is easy to transform their characters into the old-style writing form. In comparison, Xu Bing has completely given up the narrative expression and chosen the subjectivity of artistic language. Especially the plural series of the works had been brought a deep mysterious, very rational, artificial beauty.<sup>59</sup> Lu Shengzhong put forward the metaphor of "Ya Chan" and "Crazy Zen" to distinguish the artistic language of Xu Bing and Gu, Wu and others.<sup>60</sup> I agreed his conclusion that "Gu Wenda's 'Text' is 'Calligraphy', Wu Shanzhuan's is 'Script', and Xu Bing's is the real 'Character'".<sup>61</sup> The idea that Jia Fangzhou excluded "Pronunciation" of Xu Bing's text, and turned to "visual symbols" and has pointed out their differences.<sup>62</sup> Gu and Wu are also the dismantling and reorganization of the text as a carrier of meaning. However, Wu Shan's "Red Humor" series (including "The Novels of the Second Chapter of the Novels", "Red Seal" "Red Flag Fluttering" can still be seen from the traces of large-scale black-faced posters and advertisements. Gu has created a familiar text environment in order to impact the language of traditional ink painting, however he did not break away from the declarative transformation of the text. They are different from Xu Bing's obstruction to reading and "this is the purity of the language of visual art."<sup>63</sup> At the level of artistic expression, Gu and Wu's transformation of the text is not worthless, but it can only be said that it still stays in "Characteristics" rather than "Purposes". Therefore, although Xu Bing's "Typo" or "Pseudo-Character" was born after Gu and Wu, it was actually a breakthrough in visual form. Hence, we can conclude

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<sup>59</sup> Bing Xu, "[New Exploration and Recognition of Plural Painting]," *ART*, no. 10 (1987):52.

<sup>60</sup> Nan-Min Wong, "[No Noble Laocoon: The Era of "Heavenly Book" and the "Little Red Man" Buried with Him]," <https://news.arttron.net/20071205/n38544.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Gao-Ming Lu, "[the Meaning of Clearing Up: Analyzing the Art of Characters in Modern Calligraphy]," *Calligraphy Research*, no. 2 (1994):45.

<sup>62</sup> Fang-Zhou Jia, "[Analysis of the World, Five Solutions]," *Jiangsu Pictorial*, no. 2 (1990):18.

<sup>63</sup> Fang-Zhou Jia, "[Xu Bing Phenomenon" Public Comment Lu Shengzhong]," *ART*, no. 01 (1989):23.

that the statement that Xu's text creations are learned from Gu and Wu's is unscientific.

Example (Figure 5.2, Figure 5.3, Figure 5.4)



Figure 5.2 Gu Wenda's Text Series “风雨” (Wind and Rain) (It's readable)



Figure 5.3 The Wu Shanzhuan's "Red Humor". (It's readable)

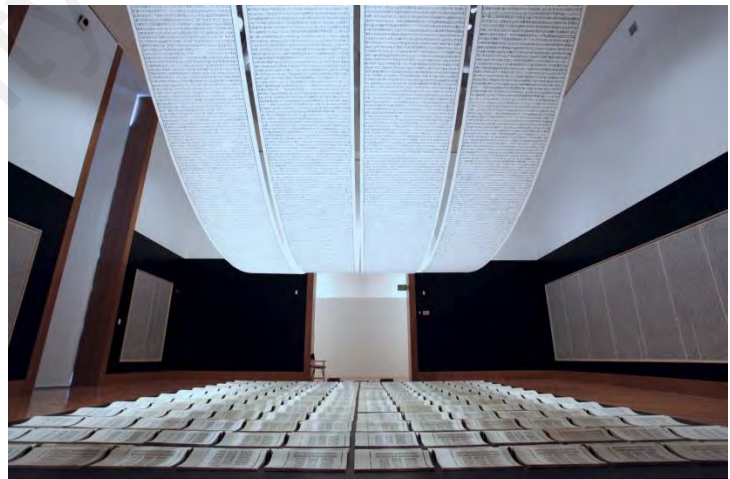


Figure 5.4 Xu Bing's Book from the Sky (It is meaningless)

For art language has become a tool to display a kind of thinking. Modern art is a language revolution caused by new concept. In the development of Chinese contemporary art and the efforts in the international area, it is inevitable to go through a process of repeated experiments. Many of the creations of Chinese character art have

been used as powerful weapons for breakthroughs by some artists. Of course, in the tide of "Chinese character art" as a creative opportunity, the buried artists are everywhere, but this does not hinder Xu Bing's determination to go on the transformation of Chinese characters, his works from the unreadable "Book from the Sky" to "Neo English calligraphy" with the functional return. Xu Bing's success lies in the fact that his art of writing shows a change in his own logic and maintains a certain coherence and continuity.

"Chinese Character Art" is oriented in the category of contemporary art with the symbolic system. It cannot deny the academic existence and historical significance of traditional calligraphy and modern calligraphy. Not only that, Xu Bing's Chinese character experiment also explores the formal changes, the media of traditional art and text art. We can even see the traces of traditional folk Chinese calligraphy art in Neo English calligraphy.

Guo Moruo believes people have the conscious use of words as works of art, or to make the text itself artistic or decorative since the "Spring and Autumn Period".<sup>64</sup> The overall expressive power of Chinese characters has the generality of visual presentation and aesthetic expression and is a language tool with symbolic meaning. As the original class attribute of Chinese characters evolved into the aesthetic product of the game, the decorative elements of the Chinese character form were refined and emphasized. The traditional form of folk Chinese character art pays attention to the dual functions of decoration and practicality and pursues the change of form and pattern in the form of text. For example, in the traditional Chinese characters, there are common words, such as "Paper-Cutting Characters" and "Fit-in Words". The words "combined characters" include the double-happiness characters, which are called "Auspicious Character". The

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<sup>64</sup> Mo- Ruo Guo, "[The Dialectical Development of Ancient Writing]," *Archaeology*, no. 03 (1972):16. In China, the historical period from 770 BC to 476 BC is known as the "Spring and Autumn Period".

circulation between these artistic styles and forms, and the connection between social culture and folk art, evolved into a common ways for the common people to express their desire to avoid the bad situation. Example (Figure 5.5, Figure 5.6)



**Figure 5.5 The Folk Conjunction Chinese Character “招财进宝” (Bring in Wealth and Treasure) “黄金万两” (A Ton of Gold), “日进斗金” (Getting more Money Every Day), etc.**





**Figure 5.6 The folk Conjunction Chinese Text**

After the created symbols are acquired, they are loaded with their own new meanings and beyond the familiar model of the text, giving the content a fresh association. Neo English calligraphy is very similar to the principle of the creation of this folk combination. It is arranged according to the order in which the Chinese characters are written, and the symbolic structure formed by the combination of the Chinese radicals, the main point is that it was connected with the English words. The readable and writable functional realization, the work "Monkey Fishing Moon" is an



extension of the Neo English language, and it is also strikingly similar to the art of paper-cutting.<sup>65</sup> Example (Figure 5.7, Figure 5.8)



**Figure 5.7 The Illustration of the Monkey Fishing Moon in Chinese Folk Paper-Cut Art**

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<sup>65</sup> "[Xu Bing: Monkey Fishing Moon]", *Contemporary Art*, no. 6 (2002):17.s



**Figure 5.8 Xu Bing's "Monkey Fishing Moon" exhibition at the Sackler Gallery in Washington, USA**

The linguistic theory holds that "this article is essentially intersexuality, and it is a conformity composed of the relationship between the text and the original text in terms of repetition, play, and juxtaposition."<sup>66</sup> In this sense, any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts. That is Bart's "New Group". The original idea is the

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<sup>66</sup> Jie Hong, "[Rhetoric Theory of Contemporary Chinese Conceptual Art]," *Periodical*, no. 07 (2006):15.

traditional root of the Neo English calligraphy, which is essentially "existing and existing expressions" translocation". Therefore, human "knowledge" is continuous influenced by ethnic, regional and cultural influences. "Now it seems that what is helpful to our artistic creation is the introspection of one's national character, the philosophical view and wisdom in the cultural genes and people who grew up in mainland China and the overall experience of finding a socialist road, Method as well as experience with Western concept".<sup>67</sup> One of the main tasks of visual culture research in contemporary art criticism is to analyze how these complex images were gathered together, especially to direct the attention of criticism to visual experience in everyday life. "Image research is not only a study of visual forms, but actually to enter the level of ideas. The research of images is both cultural study and study of visual culture".<sup>68</sup> The conceptual art is the result of the development of art. Vital Visual culture relies on the trend and reproduction of such visualization or visualization. After all, when "the artistic concept cannot be isomorphic with the artistic language, the concept is ultimately the concept".<sup>69</sup>

So we can conclude that doubting the originality of Xu Bing's text art is unscientific. Its inspiration comes from the revision and artistic conversion of traditional cultural elements and image forms. This is the way to seek artistic originality. This originality debate comes from the serious sense of mission to provide an image of art acceptance when new art concept is created. In current interpretation of criticism with originality analysis, it seems that it has become obsolete and tacky. In fact, the problem of originality is still directly related to the foundation of artistic creation and production. Without creativity, art will cease to exist.

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<sup>67</sup> Xiao-Yu Lei, "[Xu Bing: 'Art for the People']", *China enterpriser*, no. 09 (2010):144.

<sup>68</sup> Lian Duan, "[Semiotics in the Study of Visual Culture and Art History]", *Art Observation*, no. 06 (2014):19.

<sup>69</sup> Zhou Fang, "[Analysis of the World, Five Solutions]".18.

## 5.5 Analysis of the Social Identity of Neo English Expressive Forms

Text is a linguistic sign. Linguist Saussure once said that the laws of organizing language are like ghosts. It can be seen that the connotation of metaphor and metaphor in the text is different from that of its simple body. Can two kinds of cultures represented by Chinese characters and Western alphabets achieve some kind of "comprehensive combination" by making some form of integration in the form of characters? Xu Bing's "Neo English" is an attempt out of this desire. "Text" is the main medium and carrier in Xu Bing's artistic creation and it is also a key to understanding his artistic ideas and social thinking. Xu Bing's art draws nourishment from Chinese traditional culture and takes contemporary art "problems" that are happening and that are affecting people's thinking at the moment as the stopping point, activating the tradition in the modern era.<sup>70</sup> Whether it was the early "Book from the Sky" creation or the later Neo English calligraphy, until recently the "Book from the Ground" and the multimedia animation "The Character of Chinese Characters", Xu Bing's art has always been related to the characters, through the use of textual symbols. Studies of different cultures in China and the West are used to express and present words and culture, as well as the relationship between culture and people, in order to gain recognition from society.

One of the purposes of Xu Bing's creation of Neo English calligraphy is to enhance the communicativeness of the text, and communication has become the starting point and ultimate attribution point of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy art creation. The culture of Chinese characters is extensive and profound, and there are stringent requirements on the structure and writing of characters. People in other countries find it more difficult to recognize, learn and apply Chinese characters. This is one of the important reasons why Chinese characters are not ideally spread internationally.

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<sup>70</sup> Taylor and Anderson, "Non-Sense in Context: Xu Bing's Art and Its Publics."318.

Therefore, in the promotion of Neo English calligraphy, as we have mentioned before, Xu Bing used installation art instead to change the gallery into a classroom of Neo English calligraphy. There are blackboards, desks and chairs, pen and ink writing utensils, and teaching wall maps in the classroom (Figure 5.9). Moreover, Xu Bing is the author of the "Introduction to Neo English Calligraphy" textbooks (Figure 5.10) and the "Magenta Exercise Book" and "Neo English Calligraphy Teaching" videos used in traditional calligraphy training (Figure 5.11). When the audience enter the exhibition hall, they would be under the impression as though they are entering a learning institute. A lot of people were attracted to this gallery and started their Neo English calligraphy experience.



**Figure 5.9 Neo English Calligraphy Classroom**





Figure 5.10 The "Introduction to Neo English Calligraphy" Textbook



Figure 5.11 "Neo English Calligraphy" Teaching Videos

Encountering this oriental calligraphy experience from a background of English culture, participants would have gained an unprecedented experience. In this familiar and unfamiliar transition, people have challenged the old concept of culture, thus opening up more space for thinking in order to recover the origin of cognition. The features of Neo English calligraphy are just like ordinary people. They are very ordinary. The attempt here is to let the audience think it is very nice and beautiful, thereby luring the audience to walk in and experience it. After experiencing it, they discover: This kind of experiment is different yet enlightening. There are more and more people getting involved in this experience. This also proves that his Neo English calligraphy is slowly gaining recognition.

Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy finds a special kind of "intermediary" between Chinese characters and the English alphabet, so long as the method of creating Neo English calligraphy is mastered, whether it is from a native English speaker or from China, the font remain legible. In fact, Chinese characters themselves emphasize the pictographic structure. This is also one of the important sources for the development of Chinese characters into ordinary Chinese. However, Xu Bing made a special "switching" between the English alphabet and Chinese characters in this "Chinese character". For example, the "evolution" and "fusion" of radicals and radicals in each English alphabet and Chinese characters is evident. This is one of the main reasons why most East and West can recognize the Neo English calligraphy.

Xu Bing's persistence in and exploration of books and texts is consistently seen. When many overseas artists have turned to other media art, Xu Bing is still handling and trying out text media, and his writing works have received great response. He has become an "international person" who can truly represent Chinese art. Xu Bing's textual medium is a symbol and reflection of culture. What is implied by the appearance of

"word games" is profound and ingrained with cultural issues. The use of art to reveal cultural meanings or problems is more common in artists' works. However, Xu Bing's cultural problems have been traced back to the most basic unit of culture—literature. This reveals deeper levels surpassing the superficial value of art. Although the Neo English calligraphy of this square character seems to be abrupt, it has the artistic beauty of Chinese characters and the fusion of multiculturalism. Xu Bing's writing strives to bring about the popularization of people and let art itself use the language of the masses to speak. Therefore, the acceptance of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy may become an inevitable trend.

## **5.6 Summary**

Xu Bing's English art calligraphy is the fusion of Chinese and Western "word elements". Public audience recognition is an important factor to gain international impact. From the research results, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has widespread social influence.

First, the Chinese characters and the alphabet symbol elements of the integration are easy to read. It stimulated the public's study and interest in calligraphy. It promotes the Neo English calligraphy on the social stage.

Second, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy brings new expressions of calligraphy art to western countries, thereby exerting a huge influence in western countries.

Third, Xu Bing's new calligraphy shoulders the responsibility of the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, there is also a certain influence in Asia or China.



Fourth, the creation of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy symbolized the fusion of different language and words from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, lay a solid foundation for the realization of the cultural exchange between different countries.

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## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Xu Bing's creative changes mainly occurred during his life abroad in 1991.<sup>71</sup> His works are more mature in terms of creative techniques and artistic content. His artistic concepts and self-interpretation are constantly clarified. The perspective of his work after returning to China is no longer focused on the concerns of previous Chinese criticism. On the one hand, his works face a wider range of social issues, and the perspective of criticism is more diversified. On the other hand, the influence of capital and the impact of the mass media, Xu Bing also inevitably interfered by the value of public opinion. This article studies one of Xu Bing's works: Neo English calligraphy is mainly focused on the "Right and Wrong" argument. Its expression form and the influence on the world are worthy by we thought.

Xu Bing's artistic creation is quite unique which is closely related to his life experience in rural life. His creative thinking is very close to the life of the public. For example, in the Chinese folk paper-cut art mentioned in this article, these art styles are linked to the creation form of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy. The Chinese folk paper-cutting art is a common custom to avoid the murder and get propitious. Therefore, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy is very suitable for Chinese aesthetic taste. However, for Westerners, Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has promoted Western writing to the category of art. It can go hand in hand with the Chinese calligraphy in the East. It is a kind of game that can be developed intelligently. Therefore, most Westerners also like Neo English calligraphy from the East and West cultures.

Although the innovation of Xu Bing's square character is questioned to imitate Wu Shanzhuan and Gu Wenda, but the research results show that the big ink character of

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<sup>71</sup> Solomon, "Xu Bing (Excerpt)."97.

Wu Shanzhuan and Gu Wenda has the traces of advertisement. Their works do not break away from the transformation of the declarative character. It is easy to read. However, Xu Bing's square words are not easy to read, even can be said to be unreadable. This is a kind of alert to culture.

In short, the creation of Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy not only inherits the traditional culture of the East, but also explores the charm of Western text art. On this basis, it adds a sense of innovation. Xu Bing's Neo English calligraphy has elicited positive and negative responses from people with diverse background of exposure to calligraphy art, especially in the international stage involving countries in the United States, Japan and other developed nations. The various ranges of responses have certainly suggested potential significant impact that is worth noting especially in acknowledging the dynamic coexistent of western and eastern cultures.

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