

Xu Bing: [TIANSHU]. (A Book from the Sky). [Beijing, 1991.] 96; 69; 61; 76 folded leaves, Chinese-style. 4 vols. 46x30 cm. Stitched, in a walnut-wood case.

A tour de force of conceptual, graphic and bibliographic art. This superb production, by which we mean the creation of the entire limited edition of one hundred copies of «A Book from the Sky», is arguably one of the most important Chinese art works of the century.

[[Hanshan Tang Books](#) of London has stocked copies of the «Tianshu», with reference code: [XU0TS2](#).]

Background

Between 1987 and 1991, the young Chinese graphic and fine artist, Xu Bing (born, Beijing, 1955), designed a 'vocabulary' of 4,000 characters which appear, in terms of their graphic form and structure, to be Chinese, but which are entirely illegible in terms of their linguistic signification. None of them appear in Chinese dictionaries, and they do not relate to any other living or dead, spoken or unspoken language on earth. During the same period, Xu personally carved (in reverse) the pear-wood type from which he eventually hand-printed his «Tianshu» or «Book from the Sky».



Although this artist's book directly flouts those conventions which allow us to read the meaning of linguistic signs, it lovingly adheres to all the material-cultural conventions and forms of traditional Chinese book-making and bibliography.

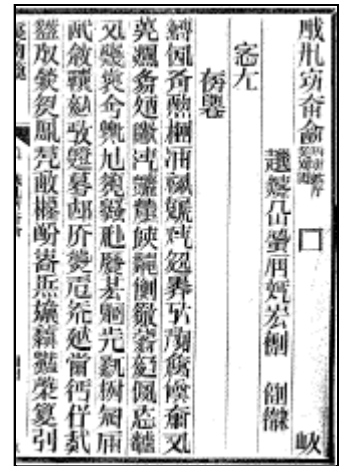
Extraordinarily, from the point of view of Chinese fine book production, «Tianshu» was printed by wooden moveable type. Although the Chinese invented moveable type in the 11th century AD, long before Gutenberg, because of the large numbers of Chinese characters required for a working font, it was not adopted as the preferred method for composing and printing books. Printers found it easier to continue with the practice of carving whole blocks of characters from which each sheet (equal to a western 'opening') was printed. Fine early editions printed by moveable type do exist. The most famous recent example is the monumental encyclopedia, the «Gujin Tushu Jicheng» (printed 1713–22), a copy of which is in the British Library. However, this was printed using copper type. The contemporary production of a fine, traditional style Chinese book in wooden moveable type may well be all but unique.

Equally extraordinary is the fact that, although he was already an

extremely accomplished graphic artist, known for his woodcuts, Xu Bing taught himself – with support from his librarian mother, and the surroundings and collections of Beijing University and Library – the printing technology and bibliographic expertise which he required for the execution of *Tianshu*. When he came to print the book at the Caiyuxiang Guji Shuchang at Daxing, he had to show the craftspeople there how to go about composing and printing a book in moveable type. Workers and managers at the factory were, he says, thrilled by the results (despite the incomprehensibility of the content). Indeed, one of the challenges of printing from moveable is even inking, since the type may vary minutely in height. «*Tianshu*» shows remarkably even inking, because of the artist's care in carving and also, perhaps, because the Caiyu factory was experienced in reprinting books from old and worn blocks.

More Detailed Description

Each volume of the book is printed on folded leaves of *zangjing* paper (This is paper intended for the printing of religious, especially, Buddhist 'classics'; some copies – to which we have not had direct access – are printed on *yubanxuan* a more yellow *xuanzhi*. The binding is of the highest quality, although the style is that of a important canonical or literary work, rather than an artistic or imperial indulgence (there is no imperial yellow and no brocade).



Each of the four volumes is stitch-bound in the six-hole pattern reserved for the best books, between blue-dyed paper covers with title labels. The volumes have covered corners (*baojiao*). Each sheet is folded along the central line of the block with the sheet edges bound into the spine in the most common form of traditional Chinese binding, but the six-hole stitching and the extra lining of each leaf (with a blank sheet bound inside the folds), the covered corners, etc. all indicate the top-quality binding which has been employed. The fold of the leaf is at the opening edge of each volume and is, therefore, *huakou* or 'decorated' with the various levels of running title, single upper fish-tail, volume and leaf 'numbering,' horizontal block rules and a series of single 'non-characters' (one for each chapter) in the position where the surname of carver would be found. Everything is in place.

The type-style of the work is that of a Ming period *songti*. However, the character count across columns and rows has been chosen to suggest earlier (religious) models from the Song or Yuan periods. There are 17 characters per column and 9 per row on each page. The dimensions of the printed area (the 'chase' or 'form' in this case equivalent of the face of the block in a block-carved book) are 32.5x47 cm, although where there are upper marginal notes (*meipi*), these extend above the top

horizontal rule. Inside each volume there is a cornucopia of traditional Chinese book-design features often modelled on specific rare books which Xu Bing consulted (but formally altered or subverted). According to the artist, these have been arranged 'rhythmically' across and within the four volumes. Broadly, volume one is straightforward, mostly standard text with little in the way of commentary but with distinct divisions and headings; volume two has a greater diversity of typographic forms, suggesting (medical?) reference works; volume three has forms suggesting various literary genres (poetry, 'three-character classics,' *biji* in the final sections), religious (sutras) or philosophical works; and volume four, after returning to a run of standard text with upper marginal notes, ends with a variety of appended glossaries and vocabularies – a character dictionary (where the upper marginal notes go wild), a glossary of selected compounds, and a word list. At the same time all the preliminaries and main parts of a complex work with multiple commentaries and apparatus are represented in their traditional formats, using varying sizes of type and design – Chinese-style solid-block 'bullets', systems of indentation, heading characters in reverse (white-on-black) type, characters which clearly represent ordinal numbers (perhaps the only construable characters in the entire text – although there are reports that one elderly scholar claims to be able to read two of the non-ordinal characters), and so on. Various well-known standard sections of a major work are easily recognized because of the typographic arrangements: prefaces (*xu*) for the entire work and also the separate volumes, tables of contents (*mulu*) the headings of which match up to chapters and sections of the book; main text (*zhengwen*), marginal notes (*meipi*, printed in smaller type above the top horizontal rule of the block), commentary in half-size type doubled between the vertical lines of the main text and following each sentence which deserves such explication (*jiazhu*). Finally (but far from exhaustively), the book also has a traditional colophon (*ba*) cut out of the vertical column rules in a rectangular box on the last page. The last four 'characters' in the work, within this cartouche, are a beautiful arrangement in smaller type 'sealing' the colophon with a vague suggestion of the real character for 'to carve.' All in all, the book offers the form of a major work, a 'Classic' or 'Collectanea' of Heaven, a work with a long exegetical history which has deserved and received the close attentions of many scholars for a millennium or more.

Artistic/Critical Significance

Xu Bing is associated with the mainland Chinese 'New Wave of Fine Arts' movement which came to prominence in the mid-1980s. It was in 1987 that he earned his Master of Fine Arts from the Central Academy in Beijing and exhibited his earlier large-scale work, 'Five Series of Repetitions,' a formalist exploration of woodblock printing which extended his mastery of traditional woodblock techniques into the avant-garde practice of the New Wave. However it was «Tianshu» which transformed him into a major figure of this new Chinese arts movement

as well as establishing him, in the longer term, as an artist of international reputation.

When the unfinished work was first exhibited in Beijing during October 1988 at the China National Gallery, it caused a sensation. Chinese intellectuals and artists have been obsessed with the relationship of their (potentially/problematically) modernist practice to the Chinese tradition. Here was a work in which the material-cultural forms of the Chinese literary and scholarly tradition are strictly, even lovingly, observed while the system of meaning underlying those forms is just as strictly denied. The *Tianshu* is a striking, beautiful, superbly-crafted, unreadable paradox, while at the same time it is an eloquent contribution to a debate which continues to rage amongst Chinese intellectuals and artists.

The importance of the work has been widely recognized, by western critics and scholars (see, for example, recent references and illustrations in Craig Clunas's «Art in China» pp. 220–22, and Michael Sullivan's «Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China», p. 288) as well as their Chinese counterparts. It is interesting to consider the different ways in which the work, as displayed or handled, is 'read' by its Chinese and non-Chinese audiences.

Educated Chinese readers can see immediately that the words of this fine book cannot be read, but they often believe – because its characters and their 'framing' are, formally, so convincing – that it must be legible to someone, that it is, perhaps, in an as yet undeciphered script (such as the Tangut or Xixia script, which the «*Tianshu*» characters vaguely resemble), or that it is a secret or lost language, or a personal language of the artist. Sometimes, therefore, they need to be reminded or 'reassured' of the fact that this book really is unreadable. It should be stressed that this is not a Chinese «*Finnegans Wake*», this is not, for example, a deliberate confusion of tongues, or of portmanteau words. The visual effect on Chinese readers may be similar to that on Western readers simply looking at the text of «*Finnegans Wake*», but in «*Tianshu*» there are no construable linguistic elements. The 'familiarity' of the characters is all a matter of (calli)graphic form, although because of the 'high art' tradition of Chinese calligraphy (which, of course, underlies traditional type design) these formal meanings come closer to artistic meaning-creation than would the graphics or typography of a similar exercise in a Western bibliographic context.

Most non-Chinese readers know in advance they cannot read the book; and they don't expect to have this ability. How, then, does the gallery installation of «*Tianshu*» differ, for them, from the gallery installation of a perfectly legible, equally fine, rare Chinese classic? Once more, a would-be 'reader' of the «*Tianshu*» has to be reminded that any actual reading is impossible. Silently, the book addresses the cultural distance

between, shall we say, a literate, educated Chinese audience and a non-Chinese audience, or, indeed, a non-literate, uneducated Chinese audience. Both these classes of viewers, those who are distant from the established, material culture of the «Tianshu» because they are disadvantaged within their own society and those who are distant because they are (linguistically, culturally, physically) outside the 'Central Kingdom' are reminded of this distance when they are informed (they have to be told!) that the «Tianshu» is unreadable; when, paradoxically, they are made to realize that not even those who are 'inside' and at the 'centre' cannot read it.

Much more could be made of the work in terms of contemporary critical theory than is appropriate here, except to suggest, briefly, that Xu Bing's book may be one of the greatest examples of 'applied grammatology' ever produced.

Exhibitions and Collections

«A Book from the Sky» has been exhibited at installations in many galleries, throughout the world. The first time it was exhibited in the West was at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison November 1991–January 1992, together with a major retrospective of Xu Bing's work; the most recent was at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, during May 1997. Copies of the book are in the collections of The British Museum, the library of Harvard University, Queensland Art Gallery and in a few public and private collections in Japan.



***Note on the 'title,' place of publication and date.** Above we give, as it were, the 'gallery title' of the work. Its actual title is, of course, impossible to transliterate, or to transcribe in any Chinese font currently available to us. See the reproduction of the title page for the actual characters in question. Also, in a nice, ironic touch, on unsigned copies, a simple round-cornered cartouche on the reverse title-page is left blank. This is the place where a printer or publisher's colophon may traditionally appear (especially on more modern books and facsimiles). However, this book comes from the Sky, from Erewhon, from nowhere. On signed copies – in practice this means all copies which are sold and have left his possession – this cartouche bears Xu Bing's signature.

More Information / Selected References

John Cayley ['Writing \(Under-\)Sky: on Xu Bing's «Tianshu»'](#) first published (in Italian) in «In Forma de Parole» 1999.1, pp. 143–153; also (in English) in Jerome Rothenberg and Stephen Clay eds. «A Book of the Book», New York: Granary Books, (forthcoming) 2000.

Craig Clunas: «Art in China». Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1997.
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Michael Sullivan: «Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China». Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Much of the information in this entry is based on interviews and discussions with the artist undertaken by John Cayley during Xu Bing's visit to London in May 1997.

[Xu Bing's «Square Word Calligraphy»](#)