

Xu Bing's *The Character of Characters* and the Possibilities of Calligraphic Animation

Gestures rather than signs,

Departures

Awakening

Further awakenings

—Henri Michaux<sup>1</sup>

Characters are born from ink.

Ink is born from water.

Water is the blood of characters.

—Chen Yizeng<sup>2</sup>

This article examines the encounters between calligraphy and animation through an extremely close reading of contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955)'s *The Character of Characters* 汉字的性格, a 2012 animation video that mediates the history of Chinese calligraphy and its intimate relationships with nature, painting and the Chinese society today. The Chinese way of practicing calligraphy, as the animation video accentuates, has shaped the Chinese worldviews and mentality, with an emphasis on copying, repeating, and reaffirmation. *The Character of Characters* was originally a commissioned video installation presented at the exhibition *Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy* at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco from October 5, 2012 through January 13, 2013.<sup>3</sup> The museum's online introduction to the exhibition describes

animation as “a medium that is new for both the artist and the museum.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the work was made available as a DVD, which accompanied a very slim manual titled *The Character of Characters: An Animation by Xu Bing*.<sup>5</sup>

There is no shortage of books, articles, exhibitions, and conferences devoted to Xu Bing, whose international reputation is widely recognized. However, as Wu Hung acutely observed, most writings on Xu Bing “have concentrated on analyzing a few individual works.”<sup>6</sup> In particular, *Book from the Sky* 天書, an immersive installation of thousands of “false” or meaningless characters that Xu Bing created from 1987 through 1991, has almost become the *ne plus ultra* of his work, spawning critical exegesis of every conceivable kind. Curiously, apart from Britta Erickson’s essay and Xu Bing’s own reflection,<sup>7</sup> *The Character of Characters* has thus far received very scarce critical attention.

The contribution of this article is therefore at least twofold. First, the article fulfills a gap in the existing Xu Bing scholarship by placing *The Character of Characters* in the context of his oeuvre and writings. More specifically, I will put my reading of *The Character of Characters* in dialogue with the *Landscape* series 文字寫生(1999–present), *Book from the Ground* 地書(2013–present), and *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll* 芥子園山水畫卷(2010). Second, I take *The Character of Characters* as a thinking lab in which I ask and seek to answer what calligraphy may offer for animation, and vice versa. Pairing *The Character of Characters* with *36 Characters* 三十六個字 an educational animated short directed by A Da 阿達 and produced in 1984 at the Shanghai Animation Studio, I will underscore how the transformative and performative qualities of

archaic Chinese hieroglyphics come into play in the medium of animation. I will also explore how audiences react to calligraphy—or dancing lines—on screen with immediate, visceral excitement. I argue that the new possibilities that calligraphic animation might bring to us, negotiated through a set of oscillations between image and text, between spatiality and temporality, between diegetic and nondiegetic conventions, enable us to pinpoint, scrutinize, and seek for the powerful intermedial creativity and its implications in an age of global media mixing.

### Words on Screen

Michel Chion's book *Words on Screen*, albeit written largely in the context of analyzing narrative films, provides a point of reference for considering Xu Bing's *The Character of Characters*. In the book, Chion makes the distinction between diegetic writing and nondiegetic writing.<sup>8</sup> Like diegetic music, diegetic writing in a fiction film refers to writings that the characters can know and perceive. It is part of the physical world of the characters. Nondiegetic writing, by contrast, refers to writings that occur on the screen but could not be perceived by the characters (the screen world's human inhabitants). Opening credits, foreign-language subtitles and title cards are habitually conceived as nondiegetic writing.

Xu Bing's *The Character of Characters* counters the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic writings—and counters it completely. The written words in *The Character of Characters* are not minor roles but protagonists. They sense. They take actions. They form a boundless universe. They spell out norms of social behavior. Stimulating immediacy, ambiguity and thought, the written characters in *The Character of Characters* call into question whether the

deeply entrenched distinction between diegetic writing and nondiegetic writing is still helpful and pertinent in such an experimental work.

And yet, there is an alternative reading. In one section of the animation video, a pattern of plant vines occupies the scroll-like screen. It morphs into a gigantic eye, literally, in the twinkling of an eye. Zooming out, the single eye soon duplicates itself into four eyes (Figure. 1). Eyebrows and bags appear under the eyes. A cluster of hair-shape leaves frame the four eyes. A face without contours. It is that of Cang Jie 倉頡, the ancient sage who is said to have invented the Chinese written characters: “By pondering the transformation of heaven and earth; by observing the revolutions of a constellation in the sky; and by examining the patterns on turtle shells, bird feathers, mountains and rivers, and palms and fingers, written characters were created.”<sup>9</sup> In the following shot of the animation video, the eyes of Cang Jie wander like leaves in a dream-like ambiance, turning natural patterns—mountains, turtles, and worms—into written characters. If we acknowledge Cang Jie as the human character in the animation video, and conceive all the written characters as his inventions, we might arrive at the alternative conclusion that all the written characters are all safely situated within the diegetic realm. If we retain the understanding that the criterion that distinguishes diegetic and nondiegetic writings is whether the characters can know and perceive the writings, the question of who the “characters” are becomes the site and vortex of mutually exclusive interpretations.

Xu Bing seems aware that his animation work plays with the tension and potential that the diegetic and nondiegetic ambiguity creates. The opening credits of *The Character of Characters* are simple and seemingly conventional: stroke by stroke, the video’s title and the name of the director come into view. An English translation follows. More intriguing is the animation’s ending sequence: the breathlessness of city life, the accumulations of capital and

commodities, the flows of vehicles and the mushrooming of advertising boards with written characters. When the hustle and bustle of city life fades out, the written characters remain on the screen, rearrange themselves, and assume the conventional form of ending credits. Rather than creating a whole new universe of written characters out of nowhere, Xu controls his own creations, which might at times take on the form of chaos, with an assumable, peaceful order. As I will continue to show in this article, this is perhaps what defines Xu's art: to reinvent a convention, to dance with shackles, and to rebel with a cause.

### A One and A World

Now permit me to dwell for a moment on the first section of the animation video. An ink dot appears on the wide screen. As if the dot has been taken for a walk by an invisible hand with a brush, it stretches slowly toward the right, gradually forming a single horizontal brushstroke (Figure. 2). It is the Chinese written character "one" (一). The full-screen dot-stroke moves with its pauses, hesitations, lucidity, and grace. The larger the stroke is, the stronger the sense of temporal pause it conveys. The purpose is less to have audiences read out loud the character "one" than to have them learn to appreciate the microscopic texture of the brushstroke. In a hand-drawn sketch of the stroke (Figure. 3), Xu carefully marks several sections and indicates that the microscopic texture of the stroke, in its different sections, should resemble that of shimmering lakes, waves, reeds, weeds, crushed stones, fields, hillocks, trees and mountains respectively.

One question naturally arises: who wrote the "one"? In Chion's formulation, the distinction between diegetic writing and nondiegetic writing further implies a distinction between diegetic reality and cinematic reality: while diegetic writing is clearly part of diegetic

reality, nondiegetic writing is part of cinematic reality but does not belong to diegetic reality. For Chion, beyond diegetic reality and cinematic reality, there is a third reality, profilmic reality, which he defines as what supposedly happens in the various stages of filmmaking.<sup>10</sup> A question about profilmic reality—like “who wrote the ‘one’?”—is what audiences might reasonably ask as they watch the first section of the animation video, and it is indeed part of their viewing experience. At first glance, the video itself seems to give us the answer: zooming out, the “one” turns out to be one character in the calligraphy work *The Sutra on the Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* 大乘妙法蓮華經 by Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) in the Yuan dynasty. At the age of sixty-two, Zhao created the calligraphy work, one of a set of seven, for his teacher and friend, Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本(1263–1323), a Buddhist monk. A small standard script composed of more than 10,000 characters, the scroll displays regularity, peace, introspection, and balance, without losing Zhao’s unique voice. In fact, Xu Bing made the animation video as a contemporary response to *The Sutra on the Lotus of the Sublime Dharma*, which was borrowed from the collection of Yang Zhiyuan, co-founder of Yahoo, and Yamazaki Akiko his wife, and was also on display at the exhibition *Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy*. The call-and-response, more than seven hundred years apart, forges at least two layers of temporalities and draws attention to an exhibition’s spatial structure and the dynamics of the exhibition space, which can itself become an experimental site.<sup>11</sup> What confounds the answer to the question, however, is the scroll of the single, horizontal brushstroke, created by Xu<sup>12</sup> on *xuan* paper the size of 12 x 69 cm (Figure. 3), which was also part of the art exhibition, and was placed adjacent to the wide screen showing the animation video. By exhibiting part of the profilmic reality, the exhibition throws the cinematic clues into question.

In traditional Chinese theories of calligraphy, a set of vocabularies pertaining to the issue of spatial structure has been developed. Two important concepts are *jieti* 結體 and *zhangfa* 章法. *Jieti* denotes “the arrangement of strokes and dispositions in a character”; *zhangfa* is also called *fenhang bubai*, literally meaning “the division of rows and the arrangement of blank spaces.”<sup>13</sup> In short, *jieti* is the spatial structure within a character, while *zhangfa* is the spatial structure between characters and rows. A standard script like Zhao’s *The Sutra on the Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* retains relatively consistent space between rows. Practitioner-based calligraphy scholars, such as Qiu Zhenzhong and Hu Kangmei, have argued for the importance of accentuating space as an analytical framework for Chinese calligraphy and have renewed the conceptual framework with contemporary sensibilities.<sup>14</sup> Seeing calligraphy as an art of spatial divisions, alternations, and negotiations—between black and white, between ink strokes and *xuan* paper—enables us to analyze *bimo* 筆墨 (brushwork), *jieti*, and *zhangfa* not as three separate concepts but as an organic whole. The line-based movement and the spatial relations that it underlines, divides and creates, make Chinese calligraphy conceptually different from the configurations of shapes and planes in Western oil painting. Moreover, what both Qiu and Hu imply, yet do not explicitly discuss, is that the space in Chinese calligraphy is not a static, solid, and ossified one, but rather a spatiotemporal process of becoming. The coming-into-being of the single brushstroke, “one”, for instance, can be alternatively read in this way: the dividing of the blank space, a process rendered in time.

Indeed, in the art of Chinese calligraphy, the fusion of spatiality and temporality reaches a degree that is probably unprecedented in other traditional art forms. Here, I am speaking of the temporality of calligraphy as an iconic medium. My point is not that a work of calligraphy displays the dimension of time because it is a poem, a letter, or a Buddhist scripture. Rather, the

temporality is inherent in the line-based movements that we recognize as the creation and appreciation of calligraphy. To begin with, there is a notion of irreversible time embedded in the act of calligraphy. The moment the nib of the brush touches the paper, rhythm unfolds. Each gesture leads to another. Each stroke leads to another. As Henri Michaux beautifully writes, “in this particular calligraphy—this art of the temporal, expressing as it does trajectory, passage—its most admirable quality (even more than its harmony or vivacity) is its spontaneity. This spontaneity runs, sometimes, to the point of shattering.”<sup>15</sup> Under the thrall of what Michaux calls spontaneity, each calligraphy work gains an independent life of its own, unrepeatable and irreversible. Unlike painting and sculpture, calligraphy largely resists *bubi* 補筆, literally “added-on strokes.”

Digital technologies, however, pose a powerful challenge to the notion of calligraphy’s irreversible time. Consider how the shot of the single ink stroke, “one”, is created in the making process: scan the whole image of the scroll of the single brushstroke, created by Xu (Figure. 3); import the scanned image into a digital program such as Photoshop; erase the right end of the stroke in the image; save the new image; erase a little more; save another frame; repeat and continue the process; finally, place all the images that have been saved in an editing software program as successive frames in reverse order: the image that is saved last becomes the first frame of the shot. In this manner, time is reversed.

A notion of “belatedness” is fundamental to the appreciation of a work of calligraphy, and in this case, a work of calligraphy on the screen. In George Kubler’s formulation, the role of the art historian is strikingly similar to that of the astronomer: both deal with “appearances noted in the present but occurring in the past,” “transpos[ing], reduc[ing], compos[ing], and color[ing] a facsimile which describes the shape of time.”<sup>16</sup> In this light, calligraphy makes itself distinct



from other traditional art forms in that, in the “facsimile” of calligraphy, the trajectory—passage—of time never hides itself. Through the presence of the physical “brush trace”, a work of calligraphy enables audiences to experience—indeed re-experience—the brush or wrist movement of an artist. An interpretive relation of the ink strokes within and between written characters, in all its consecutive phases, is visible within the “facsimile.” As Lothar Ledderose describes, “A proper viewer follows with his eyes the brush movements through each of the characters and the sequence of the lines. He thus re-creates for himself the moments of the actual creation. The viewer senses the technical dexterity and the subtleties in the movement of the writer’s hand, and he may feel as if he looked over the shoulder of the writer himself and observed him while he wrote. The viewer thus establishes an immediate and personal rapport with the writer of the piece.”<sup>17</sup> Ledderose’s words sound like an apt description of our viewing experience of the section of the horizontal stroke. The re-embodiment of movement in calligraphy, as I term it, allows the viewer to perceive, approach, and revivify the emotional, mental, and psychological state of the artist at the moment of creating the piece of work. The Chinese phrase “as my hand copies, my heart follows” 心追手摹 sums it all up.

In a matter reminiscent of the Daoist wisdom that “one gives birth to two; two give birth to three; three give birth to the myriad things of the world,”<sup>18</sup> the calligraphy scroll *The Sutra on the Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* (which contains “one”) shatters, entering into an animated landscape. The landscape is recognizable as a variation of *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* 鵲華秋色圖, “which we believe [Zhao Mengfu] painted in the winter of 1295 to 96”<sup>19</sup> (Figure. 4 and Figure. 5): the bread-loaf of Mount Qiao and the conical form of Mount Hua make its identity unmistakable. As Zhao’s own inscription on the scroll, also written in standard script, tells us, *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* was done for his close friend

Zhou Mi 周密, who had lived his entire life in the south and never had the opportunity to visit his ancestral hometown, the Jinan region of Shandong in the northeast, close to Mountain Qiao and Mount Hua. After visiting the scenery of his friend's hometown on his way home, Zhao painted the two uniquely shaped mountains from memory.

My intention here is not to offer an iconographic study of *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains*, as art historians Li Chu-Tsing, James Cahill, among others, have done admirable work in this regard.<sup>20</sup> Instead, I am more interested in studying the variation of *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* in *The Character of Characters* as a distinct case of remediation.<sup>21</sup> By remediation, I mean not only “the representation of one medium in another”<sup>22</sup> but also the transformations that are involved. Central to my investigation is how the transformations, either intended or not, are made possible by the medium of animation, and how they might also help us think anew about Zhao's painting.

In the scroll *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains*, the message of autumn is beautifully conveyed through Zhao's handling of colors. The use of archaic blue-and-green, in its endless variety, ties together the two iconic mountains, the marshy islet in the middle section and the tree foliage. The use of red, yellow, and tan forms a complementary warm color spectrum where the four almost identical roof-tops, the dark red and orange tree foliage, the trunks and the five goats painted in bright yellow unite in a visual harmony.<sup>23</sup>

In *The Character of Characters*, however, the autumn scenery of multiple colors is turned into a universe of ink monochrome. Gone are the great number of seals, inscriptions, and colophons in non-chronological order in which the whole afterlife of *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* is hidden. Gone are the cracks of the painting that render visible the passage of time, most noticeably the one that runs through Emperor Qianlong's oval seal on the upper

right corner. Gone are the “decorative figures” 點景人物 that Zhao painted with an extremely thin hairbrush: fishermen in boats, womenfolk in the cottages, and below the cluster of trees marking the foot of Mount Qiao, a gentleman strolling up the path. If these “decorative figures” were all to be included in the animated land, bodily movement for each of the figures would be necessary. This would be technically challenging given that these figures are drawn so tiny that they can scarcely be noticed. Also, these conventional activities that they are engaged in make no service for Xu’s animated thesis regarding the relation between calligraphy, painting and the character of Chinese people. Abandoning colors, traces of time and the finest details, the variation of *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* is less a nostalgic scenery in a specific season and a specific location, or a highly acclaimed artifact in the history of Chinese art, than a conceptual schema that displays clarity, ease, and calm.

Most importantly, Xu has effectively manipulated the spatial segmentation of *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains*. While Zhao’s painting is largely segmented into three sections, the composition of Xu’s animated variation is organized in a section-by-section relation across five spatial cells. Opening the first section, starting from the right, is a cluster of willows that guide the viewer’s unsettling line of sight. This is a section without a counterpart in Zhao’s painting. The second spatial cell, far more complex and largely transplanted from Zhao’s, centers on the conical form of Mount Hua, surrounded by a row of thick-foliage pine trees. Extending the visual unit or spatial cell are two other groups of trees, whose sparse leaves might remind us of the autumn season, bending in different directions. In the third spatial cell, also missing in Zhao’s painting, a piece of land emerges in water in the distance. Standing on it are clusters of trees, whose species are similar to those that we have encountered in the first two sections. The fourth spatial cell leads the viewer’s attention to the foreground. The disproportionately large

trees with twisting and clawing twigs are obviously modeled on the middle section of the original painting, yet the number of trees rendered cleanly is significantly reduced. The verticality of the trunks is balanced by a row of reeds, a new element near the lower edge of the section. This row of reeds and the land on water in the previous section echo each other. The last spatial cell is a salient example of the tripartite depiction of space in Chinese painting, as Li Chu-Tsing has pointed out in his discussion of Zhao's painting: as our floating gaze moves into greater distance, we encounter in the foreground, a group of willows facing left; in the middle ground, a cluster of trees of various species; and lastly, in the background, the bread-loaf of Mount Qiao.<sup>24</sup>

Xu's spatial manipulation, it must be noted, is best understood not as a deviation from Zhao's artistic vision but rather as a continuity of it: as James Cahill, among others, has pointed out, Mount Hua and Mount Qiao, "in reality far apart, are arbitrarily drawn close together and shown as though they were modest protrusions from a marshy plain."<sup>25</sup> A form of spatial manipulation is already at work as Zhao takes artistic license with the distance.

It is reasonable to argue that Xu manipulates the spatial segmentation of *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* to fit into the 6.43: 1 ratio of the animation video. And yet, a close observation of the animation of the shot reveals more convincing reasons. A myna flies into the picture, and as if knowing that the myna needs a twig to land on, two trees from the fourth spatial cell enlarge themselves to the full-screen mode, and a twig turns itself around. If Zhao, an artist of the Yuan dynasty, is paying tribute to an earlier tradition of Chinese landscape painting in which the size of each object could be arbitrarily determined by its importance, according to the artist's perception, rather than reality, Xu uses animation as his means of making visible the process of proportional manipulation that both he and Zhao are engaged in. A

human appears on the right and competes with the myna in a voice contest. The human, however, does not take on the form of any decorative figures in Zhao's painting but instead manifests itself as a modern icon, one that is reminiscent of the human symbol on the cover of Xu's *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point*,<sup>26</sup> a book written with existing symbols, icons and emoji predominantly drawn from the public sphere, the central product of his *Book from the Ground* project (2013—present). "He" is not this or that person, but rather the abstraction of the concept of a human-being. Through the art of spatial manipulation, Xu retains ample empty space between the myna and the human, allowing primitive musical symbols to pass from one to the other, and the other way around. The tree on which the myna stays is facing right, and the willow near the human is facing left. Together they form an arc, which largely coincides with the trajectory of the flying musical symbols. It can hardly be imagined how the sound production competition takes place in Zhao's original composition.

### The Pictographic Myth

Let me pick up, and hopefully carry further, another strand of thinking indebted to Michel Chion. In *Words on Screen*, we also harvest countless examples, if not yet an anatomy, of what I call "words-becoming-images": when written inserts providing locations, expository intertitles, dialogue overlays and other forms of on-screen inscriptions become iconogenic, conveying meanings through their shapes, textures, colors, and movements. To give one example, among many, from *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1927): following a series of passionate kisses, the city woman gives her country lover the idea of drowning his wife: "Couldn't she get drowned?" The intertitle appears in two phrases. "Couldn't she get" comes first. Then, a fade-in of the word 'drowned?': an unbelievably diabolical idea gradually becomes

clear. Moreover, the little picture called the intertitle melts, sags, and sinks. In short, it is the intertitle that gets drowned. It is a calligram.

The idea of “words-becoming-images” can be extended in at least two ways. First, the tendency of “words-becoming-images” becomes almost inescapable when it comes to digital animation. In most graphic and animation programs, text is processed and exported as an image.<sup>27</sup> Second, the idea of “words-becoming-images” has an assumption: that words are not images. That assumption gets very shaky when we take into consideration Chinese calligraphy, which is text and image at once. While Chion has used some Chinese-language films as examples in his abovementioned book, he has never placed Chinese calligraphy in his analytical spotlight. The art of calligraphy, as Foucault says of the calligram, “aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetic civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.”<sup>28</sup> To gain a fuller understanding of words on screen, I argue, it is necessary, indeed urgent, to foreground the model of pictographic scripts that confounds the phonocentric model.

If the pictographic script has long been opposed to the phonetic alphabet, this is a binary conception that Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* aims to dismantle. What emerges in Derrida’s project of dismantlement can be said to be a theory of calligraphy: it is the graphic mark, trace, character, rather than the spoken language, that plays the dominant role in our thinking about writing.<sup>29</sup> To move away from the binary conception, one thing must be made clear first: the understanding that Chinese written characters are all pictographs is a misconception. This belief, over-simplified yet enchanting to some, seems to have something to do with the legend regarding Cang Jie’s invention of Chinese written characters. According to the legend, Chinese written characters, supposedly mimetic of patterns that Cang Jie discerned in

nature, are true to reality. It is important to make a point that counters the popular imagination of what we might call the pictograph myth: among the over 85,000 Chinese written characters of the present day, only a very small fraction of the characters and their radicals are actual pictographs.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, a far more complex set of rules are at play regarding how Chinese characters are formed or derived. In traditional Chinese lexicography, there are at least six types of Chinese characters: *xiangxing* 象形 (form imitation), *zhishi* 指示(indication), *huiyi* 會意 (joined meaning), *jiajie* 假借 (phonetic loan), *xingsheng* 形聲 (form and sound), and *zhuanzhu* 轉注 (reciprocal meaning).<sup>31</sup> While both *zhishi* and *huiyi* are often referred to, without much theoretical precision, as ideograms or ideographic in English, they work in different ways. The principle of *zhishi* means creating a new character with abstract meaning by modifying an existing pictographic character, such as adding one more stroke. The principle of *huiyi* aims to create a new character through a joining of two or more existing characters. More often, ideograms are somewhat loosely defined as characters with imagist elements, of which the pictographs are a subgenre. But among the six rules, two are clearly associated with sound. André Leroi-Gourhan, for one, draws our attention to the phonetic role in Chinese, pointing out that a majority of present-day Chinese characters contain a phonetic particle, which is intended to remind the reader of the character's pronunciation. Speaking highly of the mutually complementary relationship between the phonetic and pictographic aspects of Chinese characters, which offers "superb possibilities" for calligraphy and poetry, Gourhan writes, "the rhythm of the words is counterbalanced by that of the subtly interrelated lines, creating images in which each part of each character, as well as the relationship of every character to every other, sparkles with allusive meaning."<sup>32</sup> Xu, too, is mindful of the role of sound production, which

leads to oral communication, and eventually to the development of Chinese written characters, as evident in the voice contest scene that has been analyzed.

The tension and negotiation between the Chinese writing and phonocentrism are brought to the fore in the script revolution in the history of the People's Republic of China.<sup>33</sup> The script revolution, in particular the simplified character movement in the 1950s and 1960s, finds its way into *The Character of Characters* and is situated in the longer history of reforming the Chinese writing system. In the simplified character movement, a sizable proportion of Chinese characters went through the process of reducing the number of strokes, with the first set of 515 simplified characters published by the government's Language Reform Committee in 1956. In the animation video, three examples are given: the head of the Chinese character *er* 兒 (“child”) is cut off; the character *fei* 飛 (“flying”) loses one of its two wings; the heart of the character *ai* 愛 (“love”) is stolen. The three characters alternate with images of a child, a bird, and a heart, ensuring that audiences who do not read Chinese will comprehend the meaning of the sequence. The simplified characters are not inventions out of nowhere: some were based on previously unorthodox forms founded in the marketplace, and some others, perhaps surprisingly, had their source of inspiration in the literati's cursive or grass calligraphy 草書, a form of script which is said to be written fast, and in which the number of strokes can be reduced to single scrawls or abstract abbreviations of curves and dots.<sup>34</sup> Instead of treating the simplified character movement simply as a vulgar act that stripped Chinese characters of parts and feelings, we are moving toward a more nuanced understanding of the social, political and cultural movement as a process of undermining and relearning Chinese calligraphy at once.

Calligraphic Animation's Educational Dream



*36 Characters* (三十六個字, 1984), an educational animated short produced in the late golden era of Shanghai Animation Studio, is worthy of some discussions here not only because it simultaneously mystifies and demystifies the pictograph myth but also because it can be said to be a precedent of *The Character of Characters*.<sup>35</sup> A Da 阿達, who was born Xu Jingda 徐景達, worked as the scriptwriter, director, and animation designer for *36 Characters*. Born in a Western-influenced home in Shanghai and fluent in English, A Da frequently attended international animation festivals in the 1980s as a representative of Shanghai Animation Studio. Therefore, he is described by John Lent as “China’s animated open door to the West.”<sup>36</sup>

In the framing photographic sequence of *36 Characters*, a child approaches his father with a book in which some oracle bone characters—the earliest identified form of script in China—are written. The father, then, teaches his little son about Chinese hieroglyphic culture. To be clear, I describe the framing sequence as photographic rather than live action as it was created not by a continual running of a movie camera but by a montage of a series of still photographs featuring the father and the son, repeatedly posing while one photograph was taken and changing pose before the next photograph. The result is something close to pixilation. In other words, in *36 Characters*, the two human actors are treated as objects in object animation, and the 36 characters become true living characters.

The father’s teaching method is largely non-teaching: writing the 36 Chinese characters with a brush, stroke by stroke, and letting the child guess what the characters mean by himself. The child’s recognition—if not immediate—of their meanings, seems to reiterate the myth that the Chinese language employs a mode of signification that is self-evident and self-identical. Supposedly from the child’s point of view, audiences witness how archaic Chinese hieroglyphs, such as “water 水,” “sheep 羊,” “tiger 虎,” and “rain 雨,” come to life in the form of animation. A

swarm of vivid shorthand pictures of the operations of nature is offered via a seemingly unbroken murmur of motion.<sup>37</sup> Each written character possesses a life or vital force only when the father's hand temporarily leaves the screen, and the hand continually reappears, writing the next character, disrupting the delight in animism, and asserting his will and willfulness.<sup>38</sup> Yet, the father does not seem always to be able to fully control the products out of his own hand. Unable to stop the “rain” he has created, for instance, the father draws an umbrella (that is the character for “umbrella”) to block the rain instead.

Each of the brush's strokes quickly leads to another. Whenever the father finishes one character, there may come a moment of equilibrium. But no! It is unstable, and the movement and shapeshifting of the character begins anew. Energy flows. Rhythms unfold. The father's visible hand is constantly reminiscent of the invisible hands of the animators. At first sight, audiences might have the impression that there is a line of energy, materialized through the father's hand and the brush, into the ink-trace.<sup>39</sup> On second thought, however, the audiences must know that the movement and shapeshifting of the thirty-six characters are made possible not by the father, but rather by Pan Jiyao 潘積耀, Xue Meijun 薛梅君, Hu Yihong 胡依紅, and Fu Hailong 傅海龍—the four animators credited in the animated film.

The admirable ambition—or fatal mistake—of the calligraphic animation is to tell a story with the thirty-six characters. By the end of the work, the child tries to give a title—“The Adventure of a Man”—to the story, but the father insists that education is his main purpose. The voiceover harnesses the phantasmal dimension of archaic Chinese hieroglyphics into a seemingly coherent narrative and paradoxically proves that it is impossible to construct such a narrative via the 36 characters *alone*. In this sense, the calligraphic animation simultaneously revivifies and re-murders the myth of picture-writing.

*36 Characters* is a work of what Laura Marks calls “calligraphic animation.”<sup>40</sup> Marks makes a great deal of effort to illustrate that, in the Islamic context, a playful and willful oscillation between text and image—“text seems to morph into image and morph back again”—manifests transformative, performative, and even talismanic qualities. Marks finds her examples of ornamental Islamic scripts in ceramic bowls, mosque walls and elsewhere. The performative qualities of ornamental Islamic scripts also come to inform new media art. “Animation,” writes Marks, “is an ideal playing field for the transformative and performative qualities that Arabic writing, especially in the context of Islamic art, has explored for centuries.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, it is an old dream awakened. While aligning with Marks in seeing motion in the “still” arts, I would suggest that the “motion” of a motion picture does exhibit a new quality: we cannot see a motion picture as still (unless we take a snapshot). In the Chinese context, the performative qualities of the oracle bone script, marked on turtle shells or cattle shoulder blades, is often associated with animistic worldviews and superstitious beliefs: as a form of divination, cracks in the written characters are said to show the heaven’s will. There is also a type of scripture called *guihua fu* 鬼畫符, literally meaning “scripture drawn by the ghost”: a brush writes as if automatically, free from a human hand, and delivers a message from the afterworld—which appears in one section in *The Character of Characters*. Here, writing registers a spectral effect. Animation plays the role of a ghost, exhibiting a performative property that can communicate between this world and the next, life and death, present and past.<sup>42</sup> In addition, *guihua fu* can also function as amulets. Often produced from a set of two peach-wood panels hung on door posts on which characters are written in a style that is too frenzied to be legible, it is said to have the function of protecting the household from evil spirits. In quotidian language, *guihua fu* becomes a common phrase referring to poor calligraphy.<sup>43</sup> In short, pairing *36 Characters* with *The Character of Characters* enables

us to see calligraphic animation as a site of encounter between primitive energy and modern technology.

### Toward a Double Vision

In analyzing *The Character of Characters*, I have avoided laying out its twenty-five sections in a chronological order. Indeed, as a video installation in a museum setting, it welcomes the viewer to enter it at any point, and each section can lend to us epiphanies. The intellectual quality of Xu's work avails itself of a form of art criticism, one in which an artwork is not something to be deciphered by applying theories of some sort, but rather a fresh critical voice that wrestles with multiple strands of thought. The remaining part of this article is devoted to the "flying book" section from the animation video. I will show how this section *thinks* pictographic scripts on screen to an unprecedented degree and evokes a double vision significant for us all.

An iconography of the section to be analyzed is helpful. Pouncing into view is a landscape. Fish, trees, bamboos, sheep, birds, and stones fly into a book—a calligraphic manual of some sort—and become the Chinese written characters largely dependent on nature (Figure 6). Images become words. My focus here is camera movement, which is one of the most difficult and elusive areas for conducting formal analysis of animation. To be clear, there are no empirical facts of a camera that physically moves in the animation video's production. For most of the time, descriptions of camera movement in animation, mine included, rely on terminologies borrowed from live-action cinema, with an eye toward effects, rather than causes. To borrow Bordwell's words, what we have are some "on screen configurations" that we identify as "camera movement."<sup>44</sup> In the course of the section in our concern, the camera *tracks* purely

laterally from left to right to reveal off-screen space adjacent. The book is now surrounded by a group of children, who are occupying themselves with copying the characters (or patterns). Again, the camera moves slowly, exactly along the 180-degree line. Surprisingly, it leads audiences to discover the microcosmic structure of the human brain, wherein the repetitive activity of calligraphy practice takes root. In short, as the camera moves, sideways to what we see, it forces our attention in a rather precise direction.

In fact, throughout the animation video, this is the first time that the camera moves. The pattern of horizontal movement is used three times in total, and it is the only form of camera movement that we encounter in the video. For some, the extreme stylization of camera movement, in collaboration with the video's unusual aspect ratio, might be reminiscent of the viewing experience of a handscroll. But our viewing experience of a handscroll is never so mechanical. In fact, the camera movement here exhibits a highly anti-anthropomorphic, anti-illusory tendency. Compared with tracking forward (or backward), which, in the context of animation production, can be painstakingly accomplished either by multiplane photography or 3D modeling, it is much less technologically demanding to achieve the effect that the camera tracks purely laterally. The secret here is relative movement: if, in the production process, you slide the image layer to the left, along the 180-degree line, the sensation is that of the camera tracking to the right.

A closer look reveals that the landscape is a landscript: namely, landscape-in-script. To gain a better understanding of the animation video, we need to examine it in relation to Xu's *Landscript* 文字寫生 series. As early as 1999, Xu experimented with the new method of "landscrip"—rendering landscape motifs such as mountains, water, and grass with corresponding Chinese characters—in his sketchbook while trekking through the Himalayas. In

these early sketches, some characters have clear pictographic origins, but not the others. For instance, in one small sketch of a thatched pavilion, Xu repeats the Chinese word *tudou* 土豆 (“potato”), which does not resemble what it represents. In another sketch, he wryly writes the Chinese character *bai* 白 (“white”) to represent the empty space common in Chinese landscape painting. The schema of landscript takes a slightly more mature form in Xu’s 2002 work featuring a forest. In it, all landscape elements are substituted by characters with pictographic elements. Among (the characters of) apricot, pine, mulberry, and chestnut trees, repeated in clusters, a self-reflexive inscription is hidden: “Here there are all kinds of trees, from the North and the South. Each kind has its own painting method.”<sup>45</sup> In 2013, for the exhibition “Landscape/Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing” at the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, Xu created two new pieces. The subtlety of the forms of the characters in the works distinguishes them from his earlier ones: the written characters, albeit recognizable, are assimilated to a much greater degree into the natural and architectural elements being depicted.<sup>46</sup>

The “flying book” section in *The Character of Characters* is based on one of the two abovementioned landscript pieces completed in 2013. As is the case in Xu’s treatment of Zhao’s *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains*, what we see in the animation video is not a duplication but a variation of the 2013 landscript work. The flying book, as Xu indicates in one of his sketches for the video, is intended to be *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* 芥子園畫譜, the first volumes of which were published in 1679 in five colors. Commissioned by Shen Xinyou 沈心友 and compiled by Wang Gai 王槩 and others, the manual can be said to be a pattern book or dictionary of Chinese landscape painting. For instance, you can learn the eighteen ways of drawing a tree that are codified in it.<sup>47</sup> The schematized nature of Chinese

landscape painting, if not Chinese culture in general, greatly interests Xu. By selecting, cutting, rearranging, carving, and printing motifs from different pages of the 1679 edition, Xu created *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll* 芥子園山水卷 (2010), a handscroll version of the highly influential manual.

One question naturally comes to us: what does it mean to *animate* the landscape? In addition to giving life to characters depicting animals, such as “fish,” (a graph from a bronze tripod vessel<sup>48</sup>) animating the landscape also makes some of the characters with more complex forms much more legible. To give one example, the character surrounded by trees and stones at the left of the composition is the early predecessor of *han* 寒 (“cold”). Implied in the character is a vivid story: a person walks out of a house to get some straw. He then returns and wraps his little house with the straw to keep warm. The house, the person, the straw on both sides, and the ice on the ground together form the character *han* (Figure. 6 and Figure. 7). Animation shows us the whole process, the entire narrative, one that might not be immediately comprehensible to some if the character appeared in static form. Most importantly, the animation of the flying manual creates a journey of discovery, encouraging us to pick out the characters subtly shaped, one by one, and giving us ample time to digest them.

Xu once wrote, “in ancient Chinese the character *shu* 書 referred to three things: books, written characters, and also the act of writing. My works are mostly concerned with this.”<sup>49</sup> The three understandings of *shu* are all encapsulated in the animation scene. Writing on Xu, Wu Hung remarks, “if we say that from the 1980s until the early 1990s the ‘dialogue of media’ in Xu Bing’s art mainly employed Chinese cultural idioms (such as his already noted interest in the relationship between ink rubbing and woodblock printing or scrolls and stitch-bound books), from the mid-1990s forward, this dialogue increasingly took place between *shu*

and the computer.”<sup>50</sup> For *The Character of Characters*, the use of computers not only makes it possible to create an animation video in which the three meanings of *shu* run neck and neck but also uncovers a new layer of what words-becoming-images means: as previously mentioned, text is processed as an image in most computer programs. I argue that to think about pictographic scripts on the animated screen is to see the screen as a space crosshatched with multiple temporal rhythms, one in which the ancient story of “images-becoming-words” coexists with the present tendency of “words-becoming-images”.

Xu’s aspiration must go beyond that. Guillaume Apollinaire’s famous calligram of his lover, for instance, and F. W. Murnau’s title card “Couldn’t she get drowned?” fuse image with text, yet the ordering of signs that renders looking and reading into two activities, separate from each other, remains intact.<sup>51</sup> Chinese calligraphy might encourage the convergence of looking and reading, but the latter activity must be suspended for those who do not have the language proficiency. Sometimes the brush moves so swiftly that even those proficient in the language are unable to read the ink trace. Xu’s landscript schema, however, powerfully challenges the ordering of signs. This is especially true when the landscript is mediated through animation. Ultimately, the landscript-in-motion seeks to invoke a double vision that sees words on screen as linguistic texts and pictorial shapes at the same time, a vision through which and because of which looking and reading are no longer separate activities. If, as Hansen writes, “the historical process of disenchantment, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s account, inevitably entails a dissociation of verbal and pictorial function,”<sup>52</sup> a double vision that enables a re-association of verbal and pictorial functions perhaps indicates the unwitting and spectral return of dream, imagination and poetic possibilities in the mundane world.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Henri Michaux, *Stroke by Stroke* (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2006). The book has no page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Chen Yizeng 陳繹曾 is a calligraphy master in the Yuan dynasty. See Cheng Yizeng, *Hanlin yaojue* (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2016), 13.

<sup>3</sup> From April 29 to August 17, 2014, an exhibition of the same title was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>4</sup> “Out of Character: Introduction.” <https://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/ooc/intro.html> (accessed January 21, 2022). It must be noted, however, this is not the only piece of animation created by Xu Bing and his team. For instance, an animation promotional video was made in 2019 for *Xu Bing Book from the Ground Concept Exhibition*. In 2021, Xu Bing used an expired satellite to create a work of stop-motion animation in outer space.

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<sup>5</sup> Xu Bing and Britta Erickson, *The Character of Characters: An Animation by Xu Bing* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Wu Hung, “Xu Bing: Experiments in Media and Visual Technique (2001),” in *Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists* (HK: Time Zone 8, 2009), 29.

<sup>7</sup> See Xu Bing, “*The Character of Characters: An Animation*,” and Britta Erickson, “Xu Bing’s Journey through Language” in *The Character of Characters: An Animation by Xu Bing* San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2012), 29–62, 13–22.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Chion, *Words on Screen*, ed., and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). The book is originally published in 2013 as *L’écrit au cinéma*.

<sup>9</sup> This description can be traced back to *Chunqiu yuan ming bao* 春秋元明苞 in the Han dynasty, a very comprehensive account of astronomy, geography, history, and myths and legends, partially extant in fragmental fashion. This is cited in Xu Bing, “*The Character of Characters: An Animation*,” in *The Character of Characters: An Animation by Xu Bing*, 34. Another written account of this powerful legend can be founded in Zhang Yanyuan (815–877)’s *Lidai minghua ji*. In a dramatic fashion, the invention of Chinese written characters has been depicted as a moment when “the sky rained millet” and “the ghosts wailed in the night,” a moment when “painting and calligraphy had the same body, unseparated from each other.” See Zhang Yanyuan, *Lidai minghua ji (A Record of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties)* (Shanghai: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1964): 2.

<sup>10</sup> Chion, *Words on Screen*, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Wu Hung’s concept of an “exhibition space” is inspiring here. See Wu Hung, “Spatial Narratives: Curating Three ‘Temporal’ Exhibitions,” in *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2008), 214.

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<sup>12</sup> Contemporary Chinese artist Geng Xue 耿雪 (b. 1983), who is Xu Bing's former student, confirmed that the ink trace was indeed Xu's own creation. Geng Xue's name appears in the animation video's credit sequence as well as on the cover of the abovementioned manual that goes with the DVD. And yet, Geng Xue could not recall what exactly she did in the animation video's making process. Geng Xue, personal communication via Wechat, 15 June 2022.

<sup>13</sup> For Wu Hung's summary of the two concepts, see Wu Hung, "*Kongjian*" *de meishushi* (*Space in Art History*) (Shanghai: Shiji wenjing/Shanghai renming chubanshe, 2018), 268.

<sup>14</sup> See Qiu Zhenzhong, *Shufa de xingtai yu chanshi* (*Forms and Interpretations of Calligraphy*) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2005); Hu Kangmei, *Zhongguo shufa zhangfa yanjiu* (*A Study of Zhangfa in Chinese Calligraphy*) (Beijing: Rong bao zhai, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Henri Michaux, *Ideograms in China*, trans. Gustaf Sobin (New York: New Directions, 2002). Part of the book has no page numbers.

<sup>16</sup> George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 48–49.

<sup>17</sup> Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 29. Also see Richard Kraus, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>18</sup> This line appears in *Laozi*, chapter 42. The fundamental Daoist philosophical text is credited to Laozi. The work *Laozi*, also called *Daodejing*, was compiled in its final form in the late third-century B.C. Wang Pi (226–249) is one of the most important interpreters of the *Daodejing* text. The edition of *Daodejing* that Wang Bi used in his commentary has been the basis for almost every translation of the work into Western languages. For a modern reprint, see Wang Bi ed., *Laozi daodejing zhu* (*An Annotation of Laozi's Daodejing*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 1.

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<sup>19</sup> Shane McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu: Calligraphy and Painting for Khubilai's China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 219. In an endnote, McCausland notes that the authenticity of this painting has been a moot point among some mainland Chinese scholars.

<sup>20</sup> See Li Chu-Tsing, *The Autumn Colors on the Ch'iao and Hua Mountains: A Landscape by Chao Meng-Fu* (Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 1965); James Cahill, *Hills Beyond A River: Chinese Painting of the Yüan Dynasty, 1279–1368* (New York: Weatherhill, 1976).

<sup>21</sup> Earlier cases of contemporary artworks that remediate Zhao's *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* include Hong Lei 洪磊 (b. 1960)'s photomontage *After Zhao Mengfu's Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* (2003), which transforms the idyllic landscape into an industrial wasteland, Zhang Hongtu 張宏圖 (b. 1943)'s oil painting *Zhao Mengfu–Monet* (1999), which marries Zhao's composition with Claude Monet's oil painting style known as Impressionism, and Canadian artist Hank Bull (b. 1949)'s split screen video *Autumn Colors after Zhao Mengfu* (2012), whose footage was shot on location in the early summer of 1997. Hank Bull's video was presented to the public for the first time in 2012 at Wakayama Museum, Tokyo. It is now in the permanent collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. For a brief discussion on Hong Lei's and Zhang Hongtu's artworks, see Shane McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu: Calligraphy and Painting for Khubilai's China*, 336–337.

<sup>22</sup> Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 45.

<sup>23</sup> I am referring to Li Chu-Tsing with some modifications. Li, *The Autumn Colors on the Ch'iao and Hua Mountains*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Li Chu-Tsing, *The Autumn Colors on the Ch'iao and Hua Mountains*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Cahill, *Hills Beyond a River*: 41.

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<sup>26</sup> Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (MIT Press, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Before the age of the digital, the invention of Printed English in 1948 had instigated what Lydia Liu calls “the ideographic turn of the phonetic alphabet.” In Shannon’s invention, Printed English is composed of a 27-letter alphabet including letters A to Z plus a “space” sign; it is a statistical system of symbols, because of which alphabetic writing has become more ideographic than it ever was. See Lydia Liu, “Post-Phonetic Writing and New Media,” *Writing Technologies*, no. 1 (Spring 2007), <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/groups-and-centres/centres/writing-technologies/writing-technologies-vol-1>. See also Lydia Liu, *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Lydia Liu, “iSpace: Printed English after Joyce, Shannon, and Derrida,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 516–50.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983), 21.

<sup>29</sup> For Derrida, the spoken language is merely “a possibility founded on the general possibility of writing.” See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Bachner’s reflection on the pictorial myth is illuminating here. See Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 157. Writing on Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* and *Book from the Ground*, Wenny Teo also points out that the apocryphal notion that Chinese script is ideographic is one of the most enduring examples of orientalism. See Wenny Teo, “‘Words divide, Images connect’: The politics of language and the language of politics in Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* and *Book from the Ground*,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol 5, no. 1 (2018): 9.

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<sup>31</sup> One written account is Xu Shen (ca. 58 – ca.148), *Shuo wen jie zi* (Beijing: Jiuzhou, 2001), 876.

<sup>32</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 207.

<sup>33</sup> For two recent studies on the script revolution in modern China, see Zhong Yurou, *Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Chinese Literary Modernity, 1916-1958* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Jing Tsu, *Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution That Made China Modern* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022).

<sup>34</sup> Richard Kraus, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 77.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Lamarre compares A Da's *36 Characters* with Xu Bing's installation *The Living Word* (*Niao fei le*), first mounted in 2001 at the Sackler Gallery. For Lamarre, the two works are quite similar: "a flat black and whitish space of writing transforms into a boldly colorful animated space where layering imparts a sense of mobility and dimensionality." See Thomas Lamarre, "Nothing Doing: Xu Bing and the Nonsensuous Life of Chinese Characters," in *Immediation I*, eds. Erin Manning, Anna Munster, and Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen (London: Open Humanities Press, 2019), 79–107.

<sup>36</sup> John A. Lent, "A Da, China's Animated Open Door to the West," in *Animation in Asia and the Pacific* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 17–20.

<sup>37</sup> I am deliberately mirroring Fenollosa in tone. See Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1936).

<sup>38</sup> For an incisive analysis of the animator's hand from *Little Nemo* (1911) to *Le mystère Picasso* (1955), see Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 106–34.

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<sup>39</sup> For an account of “brush-strength,” see John Hay, “The Human Body as a Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy,” in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, eds. Thomas P. Kasulis, Roger T. Ames, and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 179–212.

<sup>40</sup> Laura Marks, “Calligraphic Animation: Documenting the Invisible,” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6, no. 3 (2011): 307–23.

<sup>41</sup> Laura Marks, “Calligraphic Animation: Documenting the Invisible,” 307-23. See also Laura Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> For an intriguing account of written communication from ghosts in Chinese literature, see Judith Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 195–96. Zeitlin emphasizes that, very often, it is the material traces of the written characters rather than the information conveyed by the words that most clearly register a ghostly effect.

<sup>43</sup> See Xu Bing, “The Character of Characters: An Animation,” in *The Character of Characters: An Animation by Xu Bing*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> David Bordwell, “Camera Movement and Cinematic Space,” *Ciné-tracts: A Journal of Film, Communications, Culture, and Politics* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 20.

<sup>45</sup> This piece was created on Nepalese paper and is currently in Ashmolean Museum’s Eastern Art collections. A label hidden on the back the artwork reads “Sullivan loan of Xu Bing.” Michael Sullivan bequeathed this piece and Xu’s *Book from the Sky* and its box to the Ashmolean Museum.

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<sup>46</sup> The new pieces created for the 2013 exhibition were loaned to Ashmolean by Xu Bing but returned after the show closed; currently they are not in Ashmolean's collections. For a comprehensive study of Xu Bing's *landscript* series, see Xu Bing and S. J. Vainker, *Landscape/Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2013). See also Britta Erickson and Xu Bing, *The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words* (Washington: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery; In association with the University of Washington Press, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> For a facsimile reprint, see Wang Gai (1677–1705), ed., *Jieziyuan huapu (The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting)* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian yingyin, 1982).

<sup>48</sup> Xu Bing and S. J. Vainker, *Landscape/Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, 139.

<sup>49</sup> Xu Bing, "Jing tiandi, qi guishen," in *The Library of Babel* (Tokyo: Inter-Communication Center, 1998), 72. A number of contemporary Chinese artists share a complex love-hate relationship with *shu*, together constituting a distinct pattern of imagination in contemporary Chinese art, see Wu Hung, with the assistance of Peggy Wang, *Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute Gallery, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Wu Hung, "Xu Bing: Experiments in Media and Visual Technique (2001)," in *Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists* (HK: Time Zone 8, 2009), 32.

<sup>51</sup> D. N. Rodowick is a source of inspiration here. See D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, 62–63.

<sup>52</sup> Miriam Hansen, "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 56 (Spring-Summer 1992): 49. See also Theodor Adorno and Max



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