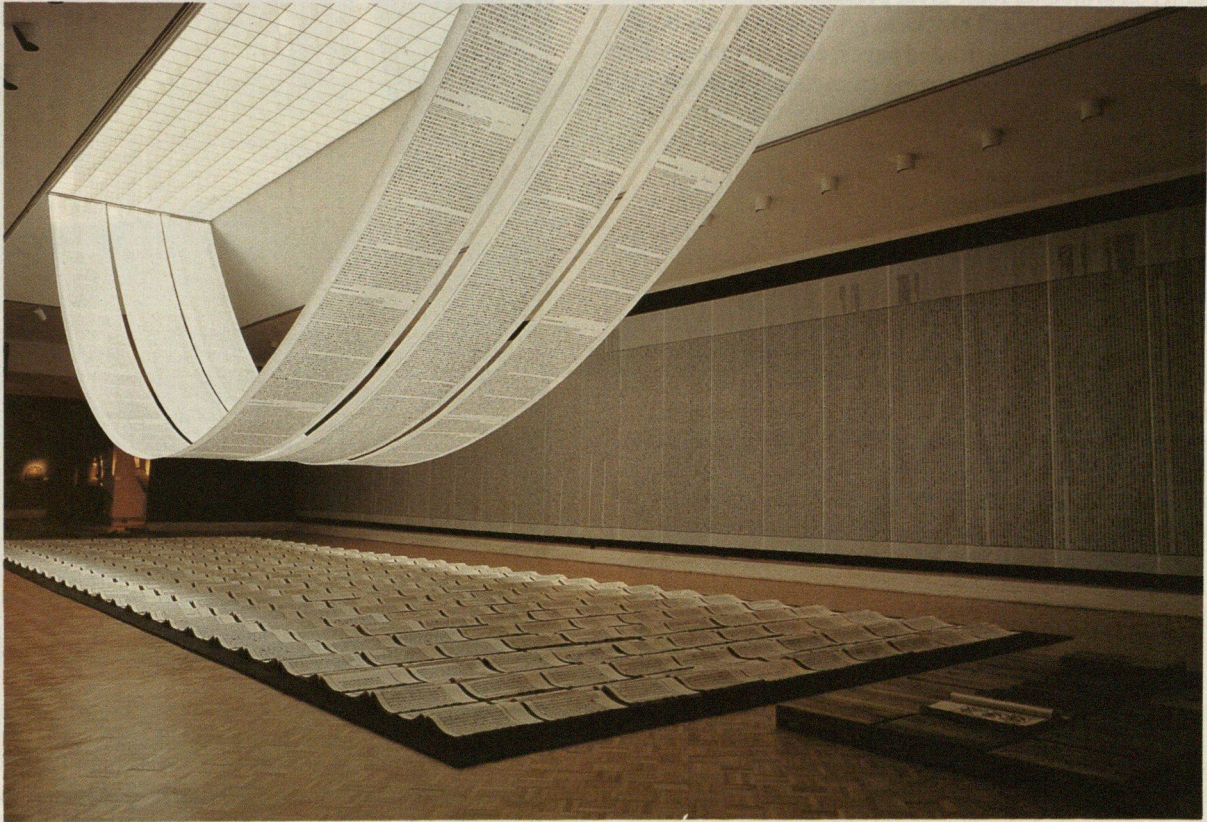


Ambivalent Icons

Works by Five Chinese Artists Based in the United States

Jonathan Hay



(Fig. 1) *Tianshu (A Book from Heaven)*
By Xu Bing (b. 1955), 1987-91
Installation, Elvehjem Museum of Art,
University of Wisconsin-Madison,
1991-1992

The history of internationally aware, modernist art in China remains to be written, but from the present vantage point it seems to have more of the character of scattered personal and group experiments than any continuous, developing tradition. The fragmentation of the twentieth century Chinese experience has meant that the experiments of one generation in one part of the Chinese art world (which properly includes communities of exile artists in Japan, Europe and the United States) have only rarely become reference points for their successors elsewhere. Currently, in the United States, one nexus of related artistic experiments involves a number of the artists who left mainland China for the United States starting in the early 1980s. The artists concerned work with fundamental cultural ideas and symbols in a way that owes much to their knowledge of post World War II conceptual art but also to their deep engagement with their own cultural tradition. Some of the artists began working in this direction even before leaving China, in circumstances which inevitably made their works politically highly charged. Others became interested in the status of cultural concepts and symbols as exiles in the United States, in the context of their experience between cultures.

Xu Bing (b. 1955) is one of the former. He came to prominence in China in the late 1980s, largely through a remarkable installation, *Tianshu (A Book from Heaven or A Book from the Sky)* which was first seen at the China Art Gallery in Beijing in 1988. He later reassembled this work for the controversial



(Fig. 1a) Detail of Figure 1

'China/Avant-Garde '89' Exhibition' in Beijing, and has subsequently exhibited it in Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and most recently at the Hong Kong Arts Centre (Fig. 1). The project was long in preparation. Over a period of years, the artist carved, in the most rigidly traditional fashion, the blocks for over a thousand characters. Although a laborious process, Xu today likens it to Chan meditation practice – a solitary pursuit of tranquility in which he took great pleasure. The artist subsequently used the completed blocks to print the text of a book entitled *Tianshu*. It was these printed pages, covering the walls, laid out over the floor, and suspended from the ceiling, which comprised his installation. Perhaps its most extraordinary feature is the fact that every character is the artist's own invention (Fig. 1a). The texts are unreadable. At the same time, Xu Bing's ideograms, like all Chinese ideograms, incorporate elements which are, themselves, etymologically meaningful, creating an irresistible urge on the part of the viewer to make sense of nonsense characters. The artist's stated intention was to create an oppressive, prison-like atmosphere, within which the viewer would be led to doubt himself. In this way, Xu puts in question the authority of something fundamental to Chinese culture and to Chinese intellectual activity, its writing. Xu's subversive intentions are clearly seen in the original title for this work: *A Mirror to Analyze the World: The Final Volume of the Century*. Xu's characters might also be seen against the background of the imposition of simplified characters in the People's Republic of China. In direct contrast to that monolithic precedent, Xu's characters are complex, 'meaningless' and supremely unauthorized.

Xu began his follow-up project in China, but brought it to fruition in the United States, where he has lived since 1990. It bears the title *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (Fig. 2), in reference to the pejorative epithet applied by a critic to the *Book from Heaven* project. In her catalogue essay accompanying the installation, Britta Erickson cites the critic's explanation of the epithet:

In the past a traveller was walking in the midst of a dark night. When he lost his sense of direction and lost all reference points upon which he could rely to judge where he was, he spent the rest of the night walking in circles in the same spot. It was as if a ghost had built an invisible wall, making it impossible for [the traveller] to leave its confines.

Xu, taking on the identity of the active ghost instead of the lost traveller, set to literally pounding a wall, making a rubbing of a section of the Great Wall in thirteen hundred sheets. Once again the artist invoked the authority of an ancient technique, only to undermine it by the use to which it was put. Mounted over a period of many months, the rubbing was finally installed at the Elvehjem Museum of Art of the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the end of 1991. With the outer walls turned inwards, and the roadway on top of the wall weighed down at one end with a mound of earth, the installation succeeds in finding a closed, iconic form for the Great Wall. From Xu's point of view, the Great Wall itself is a symbol of the massive futility of efforts to control access to China from outside, which his project deliberately echoes in its huge scale. Seeking the same oppressiveness captured in *A Book from Heaven*, the artist creates a metaphorical space exposing the stultifying effects of conservative thinking. As if to consign such thinking to history, the mound of earth which weights down the rubbing of the roadway evokes the tumulus that marks a grave.



(Fig. 2) *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*

By Xu Bing, (b. 1955), 1990-91

Ink rubbings on rice paper, earth and rock

Installation, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The recent exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre paired Xu Bing with Gu Wenda (b. 1955) who, during the mid-1980s, was a pioneer in exposing – and breaking – the taboos attached to writing. In a series of works that attracted much attention and controversy at the time, Gu worked with billboard-sized characters. In some cases he took these from the propaganda slogans with which the Communist state had invaded and sought to control public spaces in China, but which the population 'edits out' of their consciousness; in other cases, the characters were drawn from ancient philosophy or poetry. Gu's approach was to decontextualize the characters, turning them 'topsy-turvy', to use his term, by using a variety of means – miswriting, superimposition of another image, combination with a culturally unrelated image such as a Greek temple – to cancel out their original meaning. Another language work, originally projected for an exhibition in the Forbidden City in 1986, mixed 'fake' seal-script characters with 'real' (but for most people unreadable) ones, anticipating Xu Bing's slightly later work with Chinese characters.

Gu Wenda came to the United States in 1987, and now has a long series of installations to his credit, in the United States, Europe and Japan. All these recent works fuse a fundamental, almost primordial engagement with materials with dense philosophical reflection. *Liquid, Dried, Scorched White* is a symmetrical installation of three repeated units, each one centered on a suspended palm bark rain cape of the kind used by peasants in southern China (Fig. 3). Opening out the rough, organic, slowly woven cape to strip it of its functional associations, the

(Fig. 3) *Liquid, Dried, Scorched White*
 By Gu Wenda (b. 1955), 1991
 Liquid, dried, scorched acrylic, woven
 palm bark, steel and rubber
 Height 213.36 cm, length 1005.84 cm,
 depth 43.18 cm
 Installation, Asian-American Arts
 Center, New York



(Fig. 3a) Detail of Figure 3

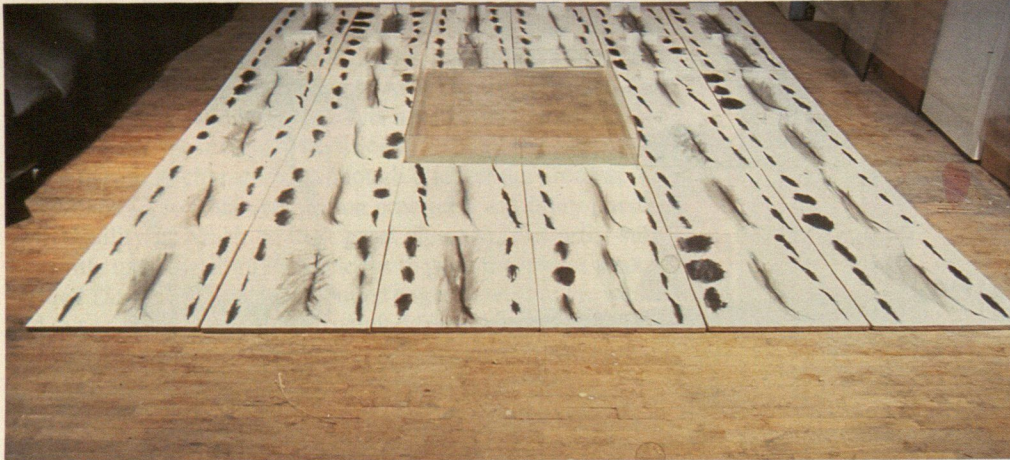


artist has turned it into a vaguely animal or bird-like form by adding a pointed rubber extension beneath, which meets the floor in a point. On either side are extended slim metal boxes containing white acrylic. However, in each of the three units, the physical state of the acrylic material is different: dried, scorched or liquid (Fig. 3a). For Gu, the triptych format and the symmetry are conscious devices to create an effect of religiosity, without any specific religious reference. Within this frame, the transformations of state of the acrylic resonate with the organic qualities of the central palm bark and rubber images. 'Every material is living, even stone', says the artist, in an echo of the most ancient Chinese animistic beliefs.

This unexpected combination of animism and intellectuality also informs a much more ambitious project, an earthwork which Gu created at Fukuoka City in Japan in 1991 (Fig. 4). The seemingly obscure title, *Vanishing Pigment Thirty-six Golden Sections*, is in fact quite precise. In a long (150 metre), shallow trench, the artist marked out thirty-six squares, each based on the proportions of the Golden Section, which Gu used for its overtones of rationality, stability and history. He then 'painted' each square, applying powdered red pigment with his hands. The searing red colour acts as an active element in contrast to the stable geometry of the trench and the squares: one of the leitmotifs of Gu's oeuvre is the pursuit of balance through confrontation. At the moment illustrated in Figure 4, however, the project was only partly completed, because it remained to fill in the trench, burying the squares and returning the landscape to its original appearance. Ancient Chinese bu-

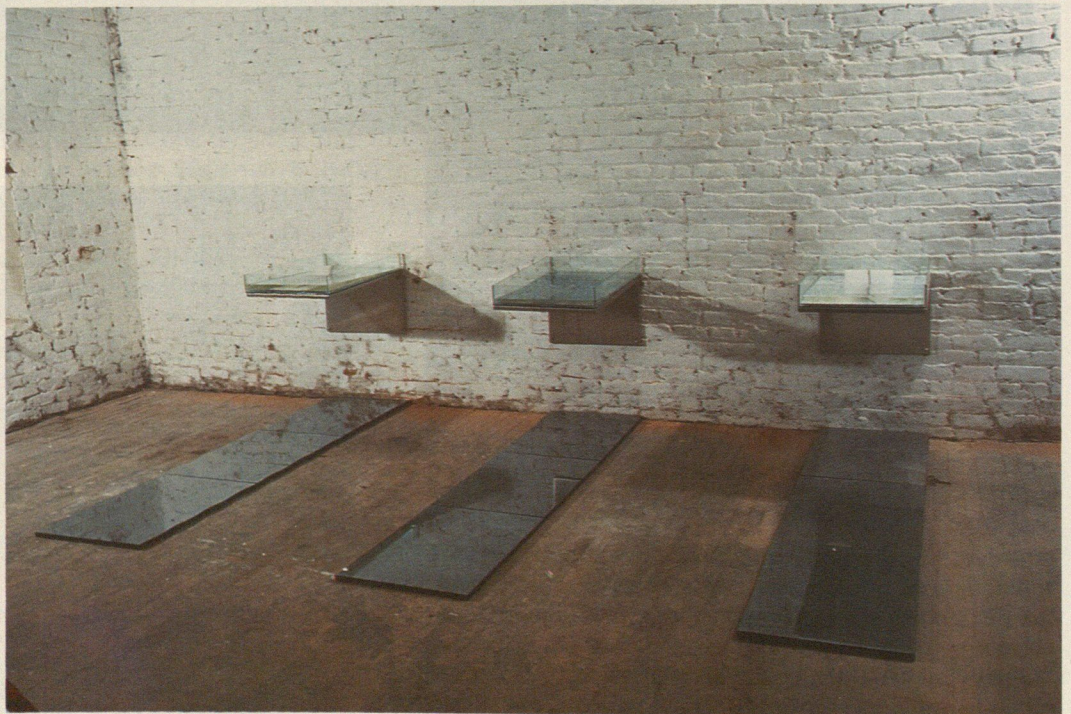


(Fig. 4) *Vanishing Pigment Thirty-six Golden Sections*
 By Gu Wenda (b. 1955), 1991
 Earth project
 Length 150 m, width 8 m, depth 2 m
 Fukuoka City, Japan
 Buried at 6 pm on 15 September 1991



(Fig. 5) *Water No. 20*, 1991
By Zhang Jianjun (b. 1955)
Glass, water, and drawings on paper
Height 63.5 cm, length 317.5 cm,
width 228.6 cm
Installation

(Fig. 6) *Water No. 38*
By Zhang Jianjun (b. 1955)
Steel, glass, photography and
drawings on paper
Height 63.5 cm, width 228.6 cm,
depth 317.5 cm
Installation, Asian-American Arts
Center, New York City, 1991



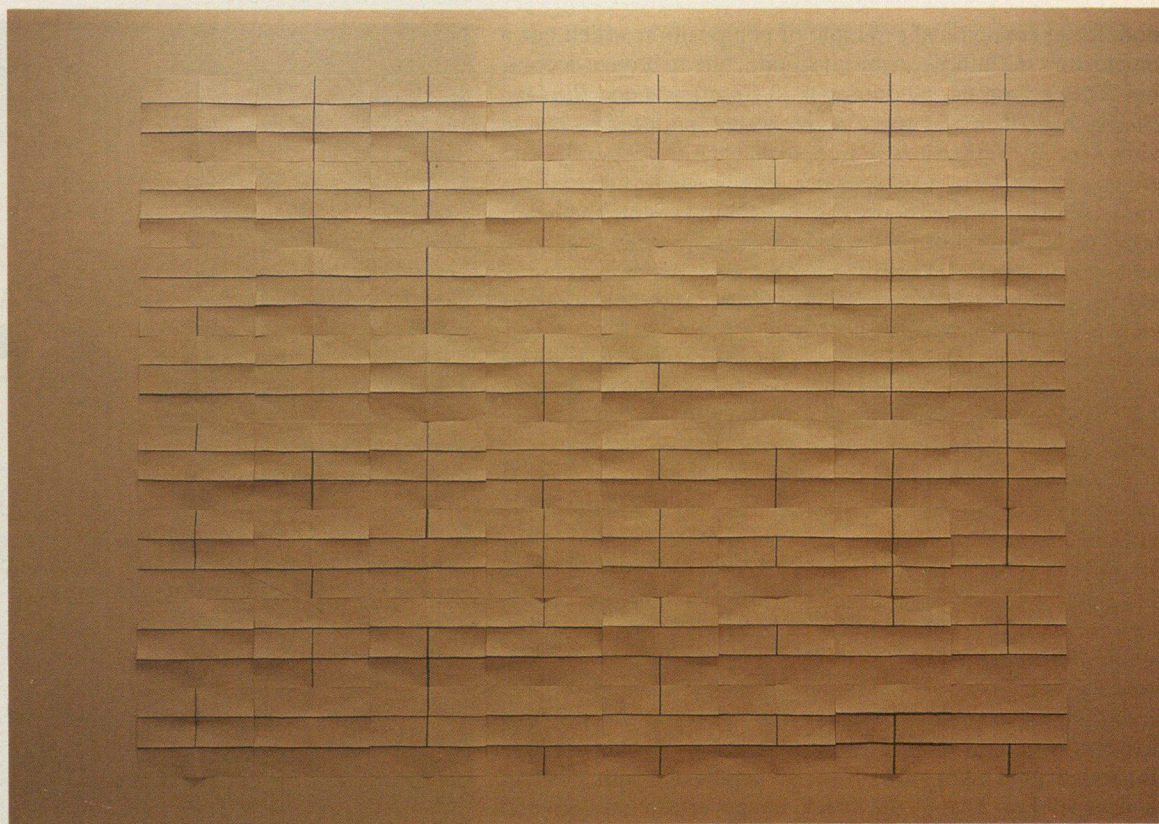
(Fig. 6a) Detail of Figure 6



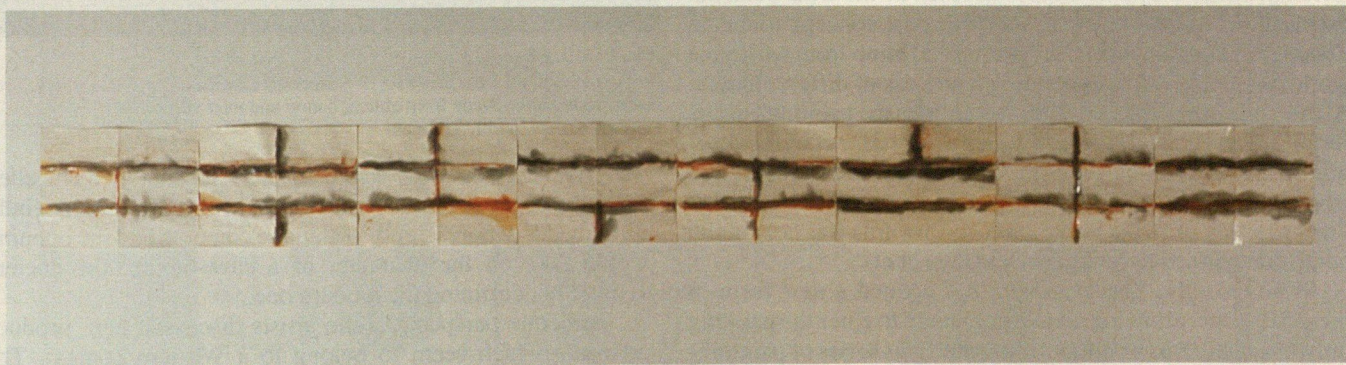
rials, with their practice of sealing up the tomb with earth, were one of Gu's reference points in creating this work, in which he aimed at a cyclical process in harmony with nature. The red pigment is a violent intervention in the landscape, but by using a biodegradable material, the artist was able to achieve a complete return to the beginning of the process. Continuity was achieved through transformation, just as it is in the traditional landscape painting that was Gu Wenda's original specialization under the guidance of Lu Yanshao (b. 1909).

Since his arrival in the United States in 1989, a third artist, Zhang Jianjun (b. 1955), has created a large series of symmetrical, altar-like installations collectively entitled *Water*. At the heart of each installation is the tension between water as a natural object and water as a concept, set within a larger tension between a deeply sensual engagement with the materials and a more intellectual reflection on nature. For *Water No. 20* (1991), the artist floats a drawing of water – an image of fluidity – in spring water, the real water being enclosed within a shallow, transparent box made of glass (Fig. 5). This square box is set at the centre of a larger six-by-six square of paper drawings. Each

(Fig. 7) *Change 64*
By Hou Wenyi
(b. 1957), 1990
Pastel on paper
Height 223.52 cm,
width 284.48 cm



(Fig. 8) *Burning Change*
By Hou Wenyi
(b. 1957), 1990
Wire and oil paint on paper
Height 27.94 cm,
length 284.48 cm



of these drawings is, in fact, a calligraphy, with a version of the ancient seal-script character for water written out in richly wet brushwork. Because the installation is set directly on the floor, and incorporates strong repetitions in the drawings together with a basic horizontality, the materials of the floor, too, are pulled into the installation, so that the piece gives the impression of being embedded in its location. By contrast, in *Water No. 38* the three boxes are suspended horizontally from the wall, floating above steel plates on the floor below, the steel itself sandwiched between plates of glass (Fig. 6). Here, it is the surrounding air that is brought into play, much as it would be with a Taihu rock in a Chinese garden. Although Zhang's favoured materials – wood, glass, water, paper, metal and plastic – are far from being the Five Elements of Chinese cosmology, the artist himself notes this as a reference for his own contemporary range of basic materials. Similarly, it is the ancient aesthetic notion of the balance of *dong* (movement) and *jing* (stillness) that gives these meditative works resonance. If the stillness derives from the geometry of the installation, movement is everywhere: in the calligraphic drawings, in photographs of shimmering water surfaces, in the movement of

water itself (Fig. 6a). These are Chinese landscapes for a Western urban environment.

Hou Wenyi (b. 1957), who arrived in the United States in 1986, is similarly concerned with movement and stillness, but within the context of a response to the divinatory images of the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*). The original trigrams and hexagrams illustrate a cosmic process through sequential combinations of broken and unbroken lines. In her *Change* series of works on paper, Hou reinvents those primordial images to form quietly impassioned grids (Figs 7 and 8). They are reticent works that depend upon the viewer's close attention and receptivity. Often, the use of white or cream paper pinned directly to the white wall, for part or all of a work, creates a disappearing effect that pulls the willing viewer nearer. Close-up, the cool rationality of the structure dissolves before the sensuality of the materials: oil paint directly applied to paper, the uneven surfaces of hand-made papers, paper that has been scorched, rust-stains from the wires within the paper marking out the grid. One does not gain easy possession of these works, but instead must slowly feel one's way to them. A distinctive feature of Hou Wenyi's larger works is that they are built up from a basic

module, an economical principle of composition which has a long history in Chinese art, from architecture to bronze decoration. The rectangular module seen in *Change 64* and *Burning Change* has given way more recently to a modified rectangle with two converging sides, a module that has great stability and stillness in itself, but which can be combined to form parallelograms, with their inherent instability and movement. The boundaries between modules in the artist's work are never neat, with the result that the grid breaks up the energy of the execution, adding to their unassertive quality. Other recent works use hand-made papers which incorporate tea leaves, leafy vegetables (*mixi*, a Shanghai speciality) and even grapes, making an extraordinarily vivid appeal to the senses (Fig. 9). Still the grid remains as an overlaid design, incorporating the organic transformations of state into the structural concept of change.

The invocation and transformation of fundamental cultural symbols and aesthetic principles is also characteristic of the work of Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943) who in 1982 was one of the first of this generation of mainland Chinese artists to move to the United States. One series of paintings from the late 1980s depicts a dark, often black image, lumpish and sometimes even square in form (Fig. 10). The image is embedded in the rich, irregular textures of an acrylic surface, itself unevenly edged. Like the best monochrome landscapes in brush and ink, this achieves a natural quality in its materiality. In the example illustrated, gold paint glows from the depths of a dark, abstract landscape. For Zhang, the black image crystallizes several different ideas that only come together in his own personal experience. At one level, it symbolizes a concept found in *Zhuangzi* – *hundun*, that is, the primordial lump from which the world as we know it is derived by a process of differentiation. At the same time, Zhang sometimes entitles the paintings in this series *Sunrise, Impression: 115 Years after Monet* in recollection of his early contacts with Western art history in China, when Claude Monet (1840-1926) was a personal hero. At that time, painting from the Impressionists onwards was not taught, being condemned as bourgeois and decadent.

More recently, Zhang Hongtu has created a new form of pictorial space, allowing his central image to enter the painting only in negative, as a cut-out silhouette. This series of paintings uses a vastly expanded vocabulary of images: icons of Western and Chinese culture, such as the book, the Great Wall, the classical orders and the hanging scroll (Fig. 11). These images in negative are framed by a burlap surface stencilled with ambiguous, fragmentary messages in Chinese and English which remind us that language provides the possibility of world-wide human contact. The use of the void simultaneously emphasizes and puts in question the cultural idea represented by the image. If a traditional Chinese thread-bound book stands in the modern Chinese imagination for the heritage of Chinese culture, Zhang's *Book* painting reminds us that this icon only works because of the ideas we bring to it. In a new twist on the ancient dialectic between solid (*shi*) and void (*xu*), the voids at the centre of these paintings stimulate us to bring new ideas to familiar icons, and thus to rescue them from their clichéd state. Zhang himself is quite clear on the subversive potential of such artistic statements: 'I believe in the power of the image, but I don't believe in the authority of the image'. This is all the more clear in his most recent series, entitled *Material Mao*, which mixes painting and sculpture to create images of Mao Zedong in a vast range of materials, from fur to brick, from ricepaper to concrete. The negative image in *Concrete Mao B* (Fig. 12)



(Fig. 9) *Mixi Change*
By Hou Wenyi (b. 1957), 1991
Hand-made paper, made from ablica, cotton and *mixi* vegetable
Height 76.2 cm, width 55.88 cm

was first cast as a sharp-edged shape. The artist then chiselled away the edges so that the Mao image in all its precision would be embedded more deeply within the concrete and the opening would take on the character of a cave-mouth, the ancient symbol undermining the modern one.

From one perspective, the artists discussed here produce artworks which seem to belong to a Western context. The installation, the earthwork, the series format, the interest in repetition, the use of industrial materials, the use of language as a visual element, the Mao image – all these features have recent Western precedents, and it is true that these artists are part of the contemporary American art world. In the context of the United States, one could say that alongside exile artists from many other cultures, they are creating works that suspend the temporality of Western urban life, and open up a global space for reflection and response.

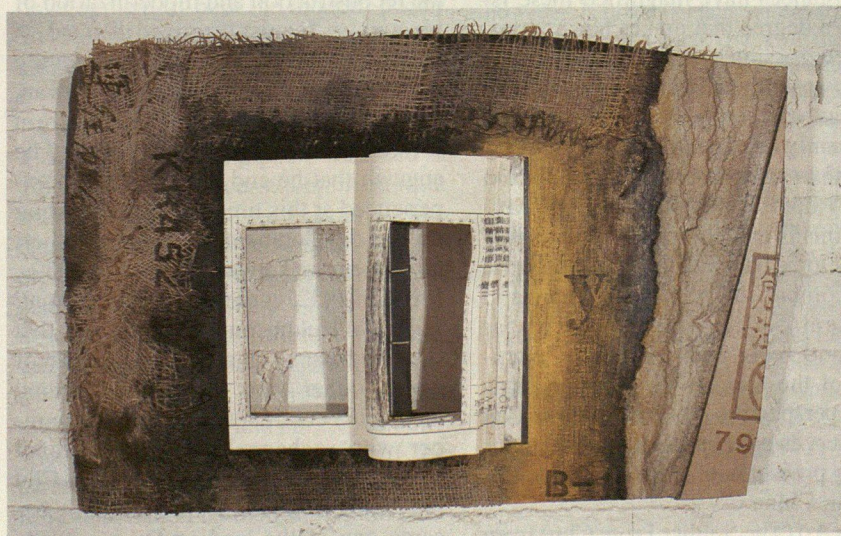
The Chinese cultural references, however, are too strong to allow the works to sit neatly in this context for very long. Xu Bing's *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, for example, though completed in the United States, shows little or no influence from the artist's new Western life, and under other circumstances would have been completed in China. The situation of the four New York based artists, Gu Wenda, Zhang Jianjun, Hou Wenyi and Zhang Hongtu is more complicated. In their case, one has to take into account the experience of the Chinese artist as exile, transporting the idea of China in his or her mind. It is not a coincidence, for example, that all four artists explicitly evoke fundamental concepts of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics; the Five Elements, continuity through change, the primordial

(Fig. 10) *Sunrise, Impression: 115 Years after Monet*
 By Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), 1988
 Acrylic on burlap, papier-maché and canvas
 Height 127 cm, width 157.48 cm



(Fig. 11) *A Chinese Book 2*
 By Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), 1991
 Book, burlap, acrylic, cardboard on plywood
 Height 44.45 cm, width 74.93 cm

(Fig. 12) *Concrete Mao B* (from the *Material Mao* series)
 By Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), 1992
 Concrete
 Height 46.99 cm, width 36.83 cm, depth 7.62 cm



chaos of the *hundun*, cyclical return to origins, and ideas such as the complementary nature of solid and void or movement and stillness. Nor is this the only aspect of their practice that can be traced to Chinese aesthetics. In the works of all five artists, one is extremely conscious of the work of art being the trace of an event, rather than simply an object. It is also striking to see how sensitive these artists are, not only to natural materials, but also to man-made ones which in their hands take on a quasi-natural status through the textural treatment of surfaces. From this second perspective, Chinese painting and calligraphy are less distant as points of reference than surface appearances would suggest. The works of these five artists transpose an attachment to China to a level which no manner of material or linguistic disruption can shake. The act of creating these works thus functions in part as a reaffirmation of Chinese identity. However, the reaffirmation is always qualified. If these artists are able to produce latter-day icons of great power and subtlety, their success derives in part from the ambivalence with which

they invest their images. From a vantage point outside the Chinese cultural orbit, these artists are opening up fundamental concepts and symbols of Chinese thought and culture to questioning, engaging China's contemporary cultural identity alongside their own.

Jonathan Hay is Assistant Professor of Fine Arts, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

Suggested further reading

- Lauk'ung Chan, 'Ten Years of the Chinese Avantgarde: Waiting for the Curtain to Fall', *FlashArt*, XXV, no. 162, Milan, January/February 1992.
- Britta Erickson, 'Process and Meaning in the Art of Xu Bing', *Three Installations by Xu Bing*, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1992.
- John Hay ed., 'Zhang Hongtu/Hongtu Zhang: An Interview', in Jonathan Hay ed., *Boundaries in China*, London (forthcoming, 1992).
- Peter Selz, 'Mice, Temples, Audience', *Arts Magazine*, New York, September 1989.