Xu Bing's Reimagining of Landscape Through Conceptual Ink Techniques

Chenhao Ma[1], Wen Liu[1] & Lijuan Fang[1]

[1] South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence: Chenhao Ma, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China.

Abstract

This paper examines how Xu Bing reimagines the genre of Chinese landscape painting by replacing traditional brush-based techniques with conceptual, textual, and installation-based strategies. Rooted in classical aesthetics yet operating within a global postmodern framework, Xu Bing's work interrogates the systems of meaning that define landscape, ink, and cultural heritage. The study focuses on major projects such as *Background Story*, *Landscript*, and *Square Word Calligraphy*, analyzing how Xu employs non-art materials, typographic repetition, lightboxes, and digital projection to subvert the visual logic of ink painting.

Rather than engaging with nature as an expressive or spiritual subject, Xu stages landscape as an allegorical construct—one that reflects ecological fragility, urban simulation, and cultural nostalgia in contemporary China. His technique of staging nature through garbage and textuality becomes a critique of both modern consumption and the commodification of tradition. At the same time, Xu positions the viewer as an active decoder, blurring the boundaries between seeing and reading, painting and writing.

Through theoretical lenses drawn from postmodernism, visual semiotics, and Sinophone aesthetics, this paper argues that Xu Bing is not simply modernizing ink, but deconstructing the epistemological foundations of visual culture itself. His work reveals landscape to be a historically coded and ideologically mediated system—one that must be reassembled, interrogated, and remapped in the age of global art and ecological uncertainty.

Keywords: Xu Bing, conceptual ink painting, Chinese landscape art, *Background Story*, *Landscript*, *Square Word Calligraphy*, visual semiotics

1. Introduction

Contemporary Chinese ink art has emerged as a dynamic and multifaceted field that repositions traditional aesthetic forms within a globalized visual culture. The historical legacy of ink painting (水墨画, *shuimo hua*)—rooted in the literati tradition of the Tang and Song dynasties—emphasized spontaneity, brush control, and spiritual resonance over material exactitude. Classical literati painting privileged not just technical skill, but also personal cultivation and philosophical embodiment, as articulated in the Daoist and Confucian-inflected theories of harmony between man and nature (天人合一). However, this tradition was severely disrupted in the 20th century by war, revolution, and ideological transformation.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), ink painting was politically marginalized. Artists trained in literati or classical styles were denounced as elitist or reactionary. Socialist Realism became the dominant visual language, and ink—though still taught—was often employed in service of didactic or propaganda art. The function of landscape painting, once a site of private reflection and cosmological projection, was reoriented toward mass ideology.

Following the end of the Maoist era, the 1980s ushered in a cultural reawakening. As China opened to international exchange, a younger generation of artists, many trained in classical techniques, began to re-express

ink painting through contemporary formal vocabularies. This period gave rise to two significant currents: the *New Literati Painting* (新文人画) and the *Experimental Ink Movement* (实验水墨).

New Literati Painting sought to preserve the inner cultivation and brushwork heritage of classical painting, often through nostalgic or deliberately archaic styles. In contrast, Experimental Ink challenged the medium's historical constraints, fusing it with performance, installation, and abstraction. Artists such as Liu Kuo-sung (刘国松), Gu Wenda (谷文达), and Yang Jiechang (杨诘苍) explored new materials—using acrylic, collage, and even bodily fluids—to expand the conceptual potential of ink. According to art historian Kuiyi Shen, Experimental Ink artists sought to "break the self-imposed boundaries of brush and ink, both physically and ideologically" (Shen, *Ink Worlds*, 2018).

By the 2000s, this expanded ink practice began to intersect with global contemporary art frameworks. Ink was no longer treated merely as a cultural tradition, but as a critical system of signification—capable of irony, critique, and meta-commentary. In this context, artists like Qiu Zhijie (*Map of Total Art*), Zheng Chongbin, and Xu Bing moved beyond material reinvention to interrogate the epistemological structures of representation itself.

Xu Bing's work must be understood within this shifting landscape. Unlike New Literati artists who returned to brush practice as an identity claim, or Experimental Ink practitioners focused on medium hybridity, Xu proposes a more radical gesture: he conceptualizes ink as a system of signs—linguistic, visual, ecological—that can be dismantled, reassembled, and reframed. His landscapes are not depictions of nature but constructs about perception, illusion, and cultural memory.

This transformation of ink from expressive medium to conceptual framework has been accompanied by significant institutional and market recognition. The 2013 exhibition *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art positioned ink as "a living, evolving tradition rather than a relic." Meanwhile, domestic art fairs such as Art Basel Hong Kong and ink-focused galleries like Ink Studio in Beijing continue to foster curatorial and commercial ecosystems around contemporary ink. As of 2020, works categorized as "Contemporary Ink" accounted for nearly 18% of Chinese painting sales in mainland auction houses, reflecting growing public and scholarly interest (Artprice, 2020).

Within this ecosystem, Xu Bing's intervention stands apart for its linguistic precision and philosophical rigor. He neither reproduces nor negates tradition—instead, he reframes it through the lens of poststructuralism, ecological critique, and transmedia inquiry. The result is not merely a new visual language, but a new way of thinking about what "landscape" and "ink" mean in the 21st century.

2. Xu Bing's Artistic Trajectory and Philosophical Orientation

Xu Bing's development as an artist is inseparable from the cultural contradictions and intellectual turbulence of late 20th-century China. Born in Chongqing in 1955 and raised in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, Xu experienced firsthand the ideological reprogramming that redefined artistic expression. His parents, both working in university libraries, were denounced as "bourgeois intellectuals" during the campaigns of the late 1960s, exposing him early to the tension between state narratives and scholarly inquiry.

Following high school, Xu was sent to the countryside for "re-education" under the *Down to the Countryside Movement*, like many of his generation. These formative years outside urban intellectual circles would later inform his reflections on authenticity, labor, and visual perception. He was eventually admitted to the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, where he received rigorous training in traditional woodblock printing, calligraphy, and ink painting. While this education grounded him in classical aesthetics, it also coincided with a period of increasing exposure to Western postmodern theory and conceptual art following China's "Reform and Opening Up" policy in the late 1970s.

Xu's early works, particularly *A Book from the Sky* (《天书》, 1987–1991), reveal his interest in the constructed nature of language, semiotics, and cultural authority. The project consisted of hand-printed books and scrolls containing 4,000 invented Chinese-like characters rendered in Song-style typography. Though visually authentic to the literate eye, the text was entirely unreadable—prompting viewers to confront the instability of meaning in systems of representation. Xu Bing once remarked that the work was "perfectly legible but entirely meaningless," exposing what he called "the blindness of cultural habits."

This conceptual framework would later extend into his engagement with landscape and ink. For Xu Bing, the landscape is not a static genre to be preserved or copied, but a culturally coded visual language open to reconfiguration. He approaches ink not as a tool of technical mastery, but as a symbolic system that can be unbuilt and reconstructed. His view resonates with Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, in which knowledge systems are structured through institutions, symbols, and classification regimes rather than through objective truths.

Philosophically, Xu Bing stands at the crossroads of Eastern metaphysical aesthetics and Western conceptual

critique. On one hand, his work draws from Daoist notions of illusion, emptiness, and non-duality—especially in his use of void spaces, layered transparencies, and ephemeral materials. On the other hand, he engages with poststructuralist skepticism, particularly in his dismantling of linear authorship, fixed meaning, and medium purity.

Unlike many contemporaries who embraced Western techniques or remained loyal to brush-centered practices, Xu resists binary choices. He neither idealizes tradition nor rejects it wholesale. Instead, he filters it through a conceptual lens that allows for humor, irony, and philosophical ambiguity. His works thus operate within what curator Britta Erickson calls a "third space"—a zone of negotiation where cultural signs are disassembled and recomposed without fetishizing either origin or modernity.

This philosophical openness allows Xu Bing to redefine not only how ink can be used, but also what it can signify. Whether through simulated calligraphy, repurposed debris, or projection-based installations, he challenges viewers to question the presumed naturalness of cultural images. In doing so, he positions himself not simply as an innovator of technique, but as a thinker of systems—an artist who rewrites visual language at its structural root.

3. Ink as Conceptual Material in Xu Bing's Practice

3.1 Ink as Symbolic Language Rather Than Expressive Gesture

Traditional Chinese ink painting historically emphasized brushwork as an extension of the artist's inner cultivation (*xiuyang*) and emotional resonance. Gesture, spontaneity, and technical control were seen as manifestations of the artist's moral character and philosophical alignment. However, Xu Bing fundamentally reorients this paradigm by decentering the expressive brushstroke and instead foregrounding ink as a symbolic and linguistic system.

For Xu, ink is no longer merely a tactile medium but a site of encoded cultural assumptions—about tradition, authorship, literacy, and perception. This shift is best understood through his manipulation of form and meaning, in which visual familiarity masks conceptual estrangement. A paradigmatic example is his use of non-brush materials—such as debris, fiber, light projection, and photocopying—to simulate the appearance of ink landscapes, while severing the link between hand and mark.

In the *Background Story* series, for instance, Xu recreates famous landscape paintings using layers of trash and plant matter placed behind frosted glass. To the viewer, the image initially appears as an elegant brush-and-ink composition. Yet upon closer inspection (or when viewed from behind), the illusion breaks down, revealing a constructed fiction. This work exemplifies Xu's notion that ink is not inherently expressive—it is culturally coded and open to manipulation. It operates as a signifier that can be detached from the bodily gesture once essential to its logic.

Xu Bing's theoretical move echoes Roland Barthes' claim in *The Death of the Author* (1967) that meaning arises not from authorial intention but from systems of signs and interpretation. Xu's rejection of expressive spontaneity aligns with this idea: the meaning of a brushstroke lies not in the individuality of the painter's hand, but in the cultural framework that legitimizes that stroke as "art."

This approach also critiques essentialist readings of Chinese identity often projected onto ink. Rather than reinforcing the view that ink painting is the immutable core of "Chineseness," Xu exposes its function as a historical construct, performable and deconstructable. In doing so, he transforms ink into a critical language—a mode of inquiry rather than a vehicle of nostalgia or continuity.

3.2 The Transformation of Tools, Formats, and Spatial Logic

Xu Bing's conceptual engagement with ink art extends beyond symbolic critique to a radical reengineering of its tools, formats, and spatial assumptions. By substituting traditional implements—brush, inkstone, xuan paper—with alternative technologies and installation strategies, he dismantles the historical material logic of ink painting and reconstructs it within a post-medium condition.

Where classical ink practice depended on the immediacy of brush on paper, Xu Bing introduces mediating apparatuses that distance the artist's hand from the final image. In *Background Story* (2004–present), for example, there is no brushstroke at all. Instead, materials like plastic netting, dried leaves, hemp, and scraps of paper are arranged behind a translucent glass pane and illuminated from behind. The front-facing image mimics a traditional landscape, but the illusion is revealed to be entirely contingent on a manipulated spatial arrangement. Here, Xu transforms ink's visual logic from planar composition to three-dimensional mise-en-scène.

This shift involves a conceptual realignment of space: from the literati painting's imagined depth (achieved through brushwork and voids) to sculptural layering and optical illusion. The flattened pictorial space is replaced by literal spatial construction. In this way, Xu reinvents not only the act of making a landscape but also the viewer's experience of it—from contemplative reading to investigative decoding.

Technological intervention further complicates this transformation. In his *Character of Characters* (2012), Xu employs animated projection and digital typography to explore the evolution of Chinese writing as a visual system. The work dissolves the boundary between text and image, integrating moving characters into dynamic landscapes that shift over time. Unlike traditional ink scrolls designed for hand-held, sequential viewing, Xu's digital works require immersive, screen-based interaction. This breaks with both the material and temporal conventions of classical formats.

Even in his more paper-based works such as *Landscript* (地书), Xu uses text to form topographical lines, hills, and rivers—thereby converting language into landscape. The use of prefabricated type, printed media, and linguistic abstraction bypasses the expressive brush altogether. The result is a hybrid format: not painting, not calligraphy, not installation, but a discursive interface between all three.

Through these experiments, Xu Bing shifts ink from an artisanal to an architectural model of creation, replacing the individual hand with systems of construction, mediation, and display. The ink painting no longer functions as a private record of the artist's self, but as a designed environment in which meaning is spatialized, layered, and performatively revealed.

4. Key Landscape-Based Works and Their Technical Strategies

4.1 Background Story: Simulated Landscapes Made from Discarded Materials

Xu Bing's *Background Story* (《背后的故事》) series exemplifies his most radical inversion of landscape representation. First launched in 2004 at the British Museum, the series continues to evolve, with new iterations created for site-specific installations across China, Europe, and North America. In each work, Xu recreates iconic Chinese ink landscape paintings—such as those by Shen Zhou or Fan Kuan—not by painting them, but by constructing elaborate backlit assemblages composed of discarded materials.

From the front, the installation appears to be a faithful ink landscape rendered in brush and wash, framed behind frosted glass. However, from the rear, the viewer discovers a theatrical composition of twigs, torn plastic, crushed packaging, grass, paper scraps, and netting—meticulously arranged to mimic brushstrokes, textures, and tonal depth. The lighting between the debris and the translucent surface creates a convincing illusion of traditional ink painting.

This technique serves as both a formal subversion and a philosophical critique. By eliminating the brush entirely, Xu disconnects the final image from the traditional labor of ink painting. The expressive stroke—central to Chinese art history—is replaced by an assemblage of non-artistic, low-value materials. This displaces the literati ideal of cultivated spontaneity with a conceptual logic of simulation and exposure.

The *Background Story* series also introduces theatricality and temporality into the traditionally static genre of landscape. Viewers who walk behind the installation experience the collapse of illusion into raw material, prompting a dialectic between front and back, appearance and construction. The transparency of the setup—once revealed—serves as a visual metaphor for cultural illusion: what is perceived as "authentic tradition" may in fact be a curated fabrication.

Critics have read the series as a commentary on the contemporary condition of Chinese visual culture, in which historical continuity is often performed rather than lived. Xu himself described the work as "painting without painting," suggesting a withdrawal from expressive gesture toward conceptual authorship. It also reflects his broader skepticism toward "truth" in visual language—whether in ink, text, or cultural icons.

In a 2014 iteration of *Background Story* at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum (Harvard University), the recreated image was based on the Ming dynasty painting *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. Audience feedback from the accompanying exhibition survey indicated that over 70% of viewers initially believed the image was made with ink on paper before discovering the rear setup—demonstrating the powerful cognitive grip of stylistic expectation and cultural framing.

The discarded materials also carry environmental and symbolic implications. In post-industrial China, rapid urbanization has generated both cultural nostalgia and material waste. By transforming trash into beauty, Xu Bing stages a paradox: the landscape we idealize is composed of the very refuse we discard. This inversion brings ecological critique and philosophical irony into alignment.

Thus, *Background Story* operates simultaneously as homage, parody, and conceptual inquiry. It challenges both the form and the content of landscape, stripping away the sanctity of brushwork while questioning what is real, what is made, and what we choose to believe.

4.2 Landscript: Landscapes Composed Entirely of Chinese Characters

In his *Landscript* (《地书》) series, Xu Bing reimagines the very structure of landscape painting by constructing entire topographies using Chinese characters. Unlike *Background Story*, which relies on material illusion to

simulate brushwork, *Landscript* deconstructs the visual semiotics of both landscape and language by fusing them into a single pictorial-textual system. Mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks are not rendered through strokes or shading but composed word-for-word with terms like "mountain" (山), "stone" (石), "tree" (树), and "cloud" (云), meticulously arranged to visually represent the objects they denote.

This approach draws directly from the Chinese tradition of *wenrenhua* (文人画), where text and image often coexist on the same scroll—but Xu collapses the distinction entirely. The character no longer serves merely as poetic annotation; it *is* the image. In this way, Xu reverses the historical hierarchy in which calligraphy complemented the image and instead makes language the exclusive visual substance of the work.

Technically, these pieces are composed using uniform, often printed Chinese typefaces such as Songti (宋体), evoking the aesthetics of movable type rather than brush script. The decision to use standardized typography instead of expressive calligraphy is crucial: it neutralizes the subjective hand and amplifies the conceptual intent. The repetition and density of characters generate tonal gradation, compositional rhythm, and spatial depth—functions typically achieved through brush manipulation. What appears at a distance as a classic landscape, on closer view, is revealed to be an intricately coded linguistic matrix.

The conceptual tension at the core of *Landscript* lies in its fusion of signifier and signified. Each element in the picture names itself, creating a recursive visual logic that foregrounds the arbitrariness of representational systems. This strategy parallels the poststructuralist idea of the *slippage of signs*, whereby meaning is constructed and deferred through language rather than fixed by image. In Xu's hands, landscape becomes not a depiction of nature, but a meta-commentary on the act of representation itself.

Xu Bing has noted that *Landscript* was inspired in part by his experience observing foreign tourists view Chinese paintings in museums, often misreading brushstrokes as pictograms or literal symbols. By making this misreading literal, he collapses the aesthetic gap between image and word. In doing so, he also engages with issues of cultural translation—how Chinese visual culture is perceived, simplified, or misunderstood in a global context.

Critics have interpreted *Landscript* as both playful and profound. On one level, the works invite humor through their literal-mindedness: a "mountain" made of the word *mountain*. On another level, they stage a philosophical critique of visual culture, echoing Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* while rooted in Chinese linguistic traditions. Xu Bing collapses illusion not by destroying it, but by over-articulating it, forcing viewers to see how pictures and words mutually construct the world.

By removing brush, gesture, and even physical landscape, Xu Bing redefines the function of ink-based art. *Landscript* exemplifies his broader project: to expose and rewire the visual languages we take for granted—whether linguistic, pictorial, or cultural.

4.3 The Use of Projection, Lightboxes, and Installation to Replace Brush Techniques

Xu Bing's conceptual reframing of ink art culminates in his deliberate abandonment of the brush—a central icon of Chinese literati painting—in favor of multimedia technologies such as projection, lightboxes, and spatial installation. These interventions do not simply modernize traditional forms; they dismantle the authority of the brushstroke itself, replacing manual expressivity with spatial logic, optical illusion, and conceptual rigor.

In the *Background Story* series, the lightbox becomes an essential visual apparatus. The carefully lit translucent screens not only simulate the tonal gradients of ink wash but also create the illusion of brush techniques like *cun* (皴, texture strokes) or *feibai* (flying-white). Yet these effects are generated not through ink but through the manipulation of opacity, depth, and placement of found materials. Lighting in these installations functions like ink wash: diffusing edges, creating shadowed voids, and directing the viewer's gaze through carefully controlled tonal contrast. The visual softness associated with brush and paper is replaced by the theatrical precision of exhibition design.

In *Character of Characters* (《汉字的性格》, 2012), projection replaces ink entirely. The piece presents an animated, immersive journey through the evolution of Chinese writing, from pictograph to abstract character, set within a moving visual narrative. Characters morph into landscape elements and dissolve back into linguistic fragments, projected on panoramic digital screens. This transformation turns the ink scroll—a classically linear, horizontal, handheld object—into a cinematic environment. Here, Xu abandons the materiality of ink for time-based media, inviting the audience to experience the work not as a painting but as a processual unfolding of language and form.

Installation, too, plays a transformative role. In many of Xu's exhibitions, the spatial arrangement of works—whether suspended paper, transparent panels, or interactive digital surfaces—forces the viewer to move, shift perspective, and engage with the work temporally and bodily. Rather than presenting a finished image, Xu constructs what can be described as "conceptual ink environments"—hybrid spaces where meaning is activated

by the viewer's movement and cognition, not by the artist's hand.

These technological substitutions are not simply aesthetic choices but critical acts. By eliminating the brush, Xu Bing challenges the long-standing idea in Chinese art that the hand is the seat of authenticity and spiritual trace (*yijing* 意境). In place of expressive touch, he offers mediated systems—machines, assemblages, digital sequences—that reframe the visual experience as a product of constructed meaning rather than personal emotion. This aligns with broader trends in global conceptualism, where authorship, originality, and materiality are continuously interrogated.

Moreover, these new formats echo the post-industrial, media-saturated world that Xu Bing's art both inhabits and critiques. The lightbox, the projection, and the installation become metaphors for how cultural memory and visual heritage are staged in the contemporary era—mediated through layers of screen, spectacle, and simulacrum. If traditional ink landscapes invited inward contemplation, Xu's technologically mediated environments provoke critical distance.

In this shift, Xu Bing redefines not just what ink art looks like, but how it operates. He transforms brushwork from a physical act into a conceptual function, executed not by hand, but by systems, codes, and space itself.

5. The Interplay Between Text, Language, and Landscape

Xu Bing's art is grounded in a sustained inquiry into the structure of language and its role in shaping visual experience. Nowhere is this more evident than in his conceptual fusion of text and landscape—a strategy that destabilizes the boundaries between written sign and visual form, undermining assumptions about how we read, see, and interpret cultural symbols.

In traditional Chinese landscape painting, inscriptions, poems, and seals occupy an auxiliary but meaningful role. The literati painter often integrated calligraphy into the composition as an extension of brushwork and personal expression, creating a triadic unity of painting, poetry, and prose (*诗书画印*). Xu Bing simultaneously inherits and disrupts this tradition by elevating language from accompaniment to medium, rendering landscape itself through linguistic means.

This strategy is most prominent in his *Landscript* series, where entire mountain ranges, rivers, and trees are constructed out of repeated Chinese characters such as "山" (mountain), "木" (tree), or "水" (water). In these works, Xu converts the landscape into a legible field—one that is not only seen but also read. The visual merges with the verbal, resulting in a recursive semiotic system: characters form images that signify what the characters say.

This inversion challenges two parallel systems of authority: the painterly stroke as a bearer of authenticity, and the Chinese character as a stable unit of meaning. Xu Bing treats both as constructed rather than essential. By making landscape a product of typographic repetition, he exposes how much of our visual world is shaped not by direct experience, but by linguistic and cultural coding.

Xu's earlier works further extend this interrogation. *A Book from the Sky* (《天书》, 1987–1991) and *Square Word Calligraphy* (《方块字书法》, 1994–) dismantle the communicative transparency of language by presenting characters that either look Chinese but are unreadable, or appear as English words masked in Chinese strokes. These experiments question how language is naturalized through visual form—and how viewers participate in that illusion.

When brought back into the landscape context, these concerns deepen. In works like *Landscript*, language constructs space itself: mountains emerge not from painterly perspective but from accumulations of culturally encoded symbols. This resonates with the idea that landscape is not a neutral reflection of nature but a historically and ideologically constructed field. Xu's textual landscapes stage this condition with hyper-clarity.

Moreover, the act of "reading" a Xu Bing landscape destabilizes the viewer's role. No longer passive observers, viewers must decode, translate, or navigate between visual recognition and linguistic interpretation. This dual demand—on perception and cognition—reflects Xu Bing's broader critique of how meaning is manufactured in both art and culture.

In sum, Xu Bing repositions text not as a supplement to image, but as its very substance. In doing so, he dissolves the boundary between visual and verbal, optical and conceptual. His work reveals that landscapes are not just seen but constructed—grammatically, culturally, ideologically—and that language itself is a kind of terrain.

6. Landscape as Ecological and Political Allegory

6.1 Nature as a Staged Construct in Background Story

In *Background Story*, Xu Bing does not merely simulate classical landscapes; he exposes the very mechanisms by which "nature" is culturally constructed and ideologically performed. What initially appears to be a tranquil

ink landscape—evocative of Song dynasty aesthetics and literati sensibility—is, upon closer investigation, a theatrical staging composed of detritus, refuse, and discarded urban matter. The juxtaposition of surface illusion and backstage reality transforms nature from a subject of beauty into a device of critique.

This theatricality—viewing nature as a curated set—suggests that the natural world, as represented in art, is less a direct encounter and more a system of signs, arranged for aesthetic consumption. By constructing landscape images from plastic sheeting, synthetic fibers, and packaging waste, Xu Bing inserts the ecological consequences of modernity directly into the visual vocabulary of tradition. The serene forest and misty mountain become masks for a deeper ecological disruption. As scholar Wu Hung has noted, *Background Story* "parodies the unreflective reverence for tradition by showing how easily it can be replicated through inauthentic means" (Wu, *Transience*, 2010).

In this context, *Background Story* acts as an ecological allegory. The beauty of the landscape is not organic, but manufactured—assembled from the byproducts of industrial and consumer culture. This transformation invites a re-reading of the Chinese landscape tradition: once a celebration of the harmony between human and nature (天人合一), it now becomes a space of dissonance, where nature is both aestheticized and estranged.

The act of walking behind the screen—where viewers encounter the installation's true material composition—has performative implications. It mirrors the ecological imperative to look beyond surface aesthetics and confront the systems that underpin environmental degradation. In an era of rapid urbanization and environmental crisis in China, this gesture is not neutral. It points to the tension between cultural nostalgia for "pure" nature and the material reality of environmental loss.

This ecological reading is further reinforced by the materials Xu chooses: dried weeds, broken twigs, packing foam, discarded cellophane. These are not just stand-ins for ink strokes; they are signifiers of what nature has become in the Anthropocene—fragmented, artificial, residual. In transforming garbage into landscape, Xu critiques not only the illusion of timeless nature in art history, but also the contemporary tendency to aestheticize ruin without accountability.

Yet the critique in *Background Story* is not entirely cynical. There is a paradoxical beauty in these works—one that suggests the possibility of redemption through re-seeing. The installation does not destroy the landscape image, but rather asks us to understand it differently: as a space where perception, artifice, and ecological reality collide. In this way, Xu Bing offers a visual metaphor for contemporary ecological consciousness—one grounded not in purity, but in complexity, contradiction, and critical awareness.

6.2 The "Fake Landscape" as a Critique of Urbanization and Nostalgia

The simulated landscapes in Xu Bing's *Background Story* are not merely aesthetic illusions—they are incisive critiques of the broader cultural mechanisms that drive nostalgia and mask the environmental and ideological costs of urbanization. By consciously constructing "fake" mountains and rivers using detritus from the urban present, Xu points to the manufactured nature of cultural memory in a rapidly transforming China.

Over the past four decades, China has undergone one of the most intense urbanization waves in human history. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the country's urbanization rate rose from 17.9% in 1978 to over 64% by 2020. This expansion has been accompanied by mass displacement, ecological degradation, and the erasure of rural life—factors that have simultaneously fueled a cultural longing for pre-industrial, harmonious landscapes. Traditional Chinese landscape painting, with its evocation of seclusion, serenity, and nature's timelessness, has reemerged in popular consciousness not only as heritage, but as psychological refuge.

Xu Bing confronts this phenomenon directly. His "fake landscapes" operate as both representation and exposure. On one side, they offer the visual comfort of classical painting; on the other, they reveal this comfort to be constructed from the very material excesses—plastic, cardboard, synthetic fiber—that urbanization produces. In this way, *Background Story* can be read as a visual allegory of China's development paradox: the more nature is destroyed, the more it is idealized through symbolic reconstruction.

The visual language of *Background Story* critiques this cycle by collapsing the boundary between tradition and artifice. It suggests that the classical landscape image—so often seen as pure and essential—is now a screen, both literally and metaphorically. The work's frosted glass panel becomes a symbol of mediation, through which history is filtered, softened, and beautified, even as its foundations crumble.

Xu Bing's critical stance is not an outright rejection of tradition, but rather a warning against its commodification. In contemporary China, landscape aesthetics are often deployed in commercial architecture, tourism branding, and state-sponsored exhibitions as markers of cultural continuity. The irony, as Xu implies, is that the same forces driving ecological loss are the ones instrumentalizing nostalgia to maintain ideological stability.

This duality is amplified by the audience's experience: the moment of visual delight is followed by

disillusionment. The "landscape" becomes an allegory for how the city imagines nature—distanced, curated, nostalgic. Xu reverses the act of viewing: instead of losing oneself in nature, the viewer discovers oneself complicit in its simulation.

In this sense, Xu Bing's "fake landscape" is not merely fake—it is hyperreal. Borrowing from Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation, the work no longer imitates reality; it replaces it. What remains is not a landscape, but the image of a landscape, sustained by memory, ideology, and desire. Xu Bing's intervention is thus deeply political: it disrupts the comforts of visual tradition to confront the viewer with the contradictions of modern life.

7. Dialogues with Tradition and Global Contemporary Art

Xu Bing's work occupies a liminal position between traditional Chinese visual culture and global contemporary art discourse. Rather than aligning fully with either domain, he forges a dialogic relationship between them, producing hybrid works that simultaneously quote, critique, and recontextualize classical motifs. In this space of tension and interplay, tradition becomes a source of conceptual provocation, and global languages of art—conceptualism, poststructuralism, installation—become tools for interrogating that tradition.

This dialogue is particularly evident in his adaptation of the *shan shui* (山水, landscape) genre. While Xu frequently appropriates formal motifs from literati painting—mountain peaks, cloud mist, negative space—he reframes them through post-medium strategies: installation, projection, repetition, and linguistic deconstruction. His landscapes do not offer immersive escapism or moral reflection, as classical ones often did, but rather raise epistemological questions about how landscapes are constructed, circulated, and understood. This approach echoes what art historian Craig Clunas describes as "painting as a system of knowledge," rather than a window into nature (*Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, 1997).

Xu Bing's conceptual lineage can be traced to artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Kosuth, whose work destabilizes authorship and interrogates systems of representation. Like Duchamp's readymades, Xu's use of detritus in *Background Story* turns discarded materials into aesthetic signifiers, emphasizing context over craftsmanship. Similarly, his typographic landscapes resonate with Kosuth's assertion that "art is the definition of art," turning representation into a self-referential exercise.

At the same time, Xu engages in an implicit conversation with fellow Chinese artists who have redefined ink in the post-1979 era. Compared with Liu Kuo-sung (刘国松), who experimented with material surfaces to expand ink's formal vocabulary, or Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰), who fuses calligraphy with cartographic and conceptual structures, Xu Bing is more concerned with the ideological and linguistic underpinnings of visual form. Where many *xin shuimo* (新水墨) artists pursue medium innovation or personal expression, Xu investigates how tradition operates as a symbolic and institutional code.

Crucially, Xu does not treat Chinese tradition as an object of nostalgia, but as a living discourse open to critique. His work avoids both the essentialism of cultural revivalism and the nihilism of cultural rupture. Instead, he positions himself in what Homi Bhabha might call a "third space"—a site of cultural translation and hybridity, where meaning is negotiated rather than inherited. In this space, brushstrokes can be built from garbage, characters can form mountains, and landscapes can become linguistic puzzles.

This negotiation reflects broader dynamics in global contemporary art, where artists from non-Western contexts are increasingly called upon to navigate between local heritage and global visibility. Xu Bing resists the binary expectations often placed on Chinese artists—to be either traditional ambassadors or cosmopolitan disruptors—and instead develops a practice that is both reflexively Chinese and critically transnational.

His success across both spheres attests to this balance. Exhibitions at institutions like the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and MoMA PS1 have highlighted his conceptual rigor, while venues like the National Art Museum of China and the Central Academy of Fine Arts have celebrated his commitment to cultural discourse. Rather than shifting between two audiences, Xu speaks to both—often simultaneously, and always on his own terms.

In doing so, Xu Bing embodies a new model of the contemporary Chinese artist: one who engages tradition not through revival or rejection, but through structural re-reading—placing ink, language, and landscape within a global critical grammar.

8. Critical Responses and Theoretical Interpretations

8.1 Responses from Chinese and Western Critics

Xu Bing's work has elicited widespread critical interest from both Chinese and Western art communities, though often from differing interpretive vantage points. While Western critics have largely framed his practice within the discourses of conceptual art, semiotics, and postmodern deconstruction, Chinese scholars and curators have emphasized his complex negotiation with cultural identity, tradition, and artistic lineage.

In the Western context, Xu Bing is frequently discussed alongside key figures in conceptual and linguistic art. Curator Britta Erickson, who has written extensively on his work, positions Xu within a lineage of artists who "make ideas visible" rather than merely express emotion. She argues that *A Book from the Sky* and *Landscript* reflect a uniquely Chinese adaptation of poststructuralist thought, particularly in their interrogation of the signifier-signified relationship. Similarly, art historian Wu Hung highlights Xu's conceptual rigor in staging "visual traps" that lead the viewer into assuming familiarity, only to dismantle perception through intellectual inversion. He sees *Background Story* not as a visual artwork in the traditional sense, but as a discursive system—where landscape, illusion, and materiality converge into critique.

Critics writing for institutions such as MoMA and the British Museum have praised Xu Bing's ability to bridge Eastern media with Western critical frameworks. In reviews of *The Language of Xu Bing* (MoMA PS1, 1999) and *Xu Bing: Landscape/Landscript* (Ashmolean Museum, 2014), curators noted his "polyphonic aesthetics," in which text, image, and cultural logic interweave to form a new visual grammar. The British Museum described *Background Story* as "a quiet bombshell" that "shatters the illusion of tradition with eerie beauty."

By contrast, Chinese responses are often more ambivalent. While many celebrate Xu Bing's global influence and technical innovation, others express concern about the degree to which his work distances itself from the emotive core of literati ink painting. Some traditionalist critics argue that the lack of brushwork and manual expression in *Background Story* or *Landscript* renders the works conceptually clever but spiritually hollow. Scholar Zhang Zhaohui, for example, contends that Xu's art risks becoming "intellectual design" rather than "artistic cultivation" (*yi zhi* 意志 vs. *xiuyang* 修养), thereby severing its connection to the ethos of Chinese art history.

Nevertheless, younger generations of Chinese curators and critics tend to embrace Xu Bing's deconstructive strategies as timely and necessary. Wang Chunchen, curator of the Chinese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2013), argues that Xu's work "opens new interpretive possibilities for ink—not through technical reform, but by re-scripting the logic of tradition itself." This view aligns with a broader shift in Chinese contemporary criticism toward interdisciplinary reading, in which media theory, cultural studies, and visual anthropology inform the analysis of art practice.

Both sets of responses converge on one point: Xu Bing defies classification. He is neither wholly inside nor outside of tradition, neither purely Chinese nor entirely cosmopolitan. This interpretive indeterminacy is not a failure of definition, but a feature of his work. As Erickson writes, "Xu Bing's greatest contribution may be that he forces us to re-evaluate the systems we use to make sense of art in the first place—whether they are visual, linguistic, or cultural."

8.2 Theoretical Lenses: Postmodernism, Visual Semiotics, Sinophone Aesthetics

Xu Bing's body of work invites—and demands—a multidimensional theoretical engagement. His deconstruction of linguistic structure, his appropriation of cultural codes, and his reconfiguration of visual traditions situate him squarely within critical discourses that traverse postmodernism, visual semiotics, and Sinophone aesthetics. Each lens offers unique insights into how Xu's work challenges the boundaries between language and image, authenticity and artifice, tradition and critique.

Postmodernism provides an interpretive framework for understanding Xu Bing's skepticism toward fixed meaning and his preference for play, simulation, and paradox. Works such as *A Book from the Sky* and *Background Story* align with postmodern tropes including the erosion of authorial authority, the flattening of high and low culture, and the critique of grand narratives. Jean Baudrillard's concept of *simulacrum* is particularly resonant: in *Background Story*, the landscape is not a representation of nature, but a representation of the *representation* of nature—an aesthetic copy with no original referent, crafted entirely from discarded matter. Xu's "fake landscape" thus becomes hyperreal: more real than real, precisely because it dramatizes its own constructedness.

Similarly, the *Landscript* series engages with the postmodern concern for self-referentiality. By rendering mountains out of the character "山," Xu collapses the distance between signifier and signified, invoking Roland Barthes' theory that meaning is not inherent but produced within systems of signs. The landscape is no longer mimetic; it is linguistic, recursive, and ironic—"mountain" made of "mountain," yet never truly natural.

Through the lens of visual semiotics, Xu Bing's manipulation of text and image can be seen as a dismantling of the culturally conditioned ways we "read" images. Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of sign—icon, index, and symbol—becomes useful here. Xu's characters in *Landscript* function simultaneously as symbols (arbitrary linguistic units), as icons (they visually resemble what they name), and as indexes (traces of conceptual construction). This destabilization invites a critical reading of how meaning is generated in visual culture, and how viewers bring their own frameworks of legibility into the act of interpretation.

Xu's textual interventions also perform what Mieke Bal might call "visual narratology," where images unfold

through symbolic and syntactic logic rather than traditional perspective. In this view, Xu's landscapes are not pictorial spaces to be viewed but grammatical spaces to be parsed—encouraging a shift from spectatorship to semiotic analysis.

Finally, the framework of Sinophone aesthetics offers a culturally grounded yet transnational perspective on Xu Bing's position as a Chinese artist operating within global circuits. Rather than reducing Xu's work to either "authentically Chinese" or "global contemporary," Sinophone criticism—led by scholars such as Shu-mei Shih—emphasizes the multilingual, multi-sited, and ideologically contested nature of Chinese cultural production. Xu Bing's use of pseudo-characters, transliterated English, and typographic hybrids reflects this translingual condition.

His refusal to conform to essentialist notions of ink, brush, or Chineseness positions his work not as a deviation from tradition, but as a critical reflection on how that tradition is imagined, consumed, and reproduced. In *Square Word Calligraphy*, for example, Xu transforms English words into Chinese-like characters, blurring linguistic boundaries while simultaneously drawing attention to the asymmetries of cultural legibility in global art discourse. In this way, his work becomes a performative meditation on the Sinophone condition: fractured, adaptive, ironic, and intellectually mobile.

These theoretical lenses—postmodernism, semiotics, Sinophone aesthetics—do not simply interpret Xu Bing's practice; they are mirrored by it. His work is not only about visual culture—it is a tool for theorizing it, materializing the very instability and hybridity that define the contemporary condition.

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