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Cosmopatriot Contaminations

Jeroen de Kloet

ABSTRACT

This article explores how Beijing Hip Hop collective Yin Tsang, visual artist Xu Bing and filmmaker Stephen Chow employ different tactics to negotiate between cosmopolitanism and patriotism. All are involved in a translation of a wide range of cultural forms, a translation that involves a betrayal and pollution of culture – be it music, language or cinema. It is argued that by reading globalization as a moment of cultural pollution, one may subvert any longing for cultural essentialism and nationalism. The strange bastard Cosmopatriotism provides an entry point to explore the possibilities of impurity.

Industrial Anger

The electronic hardcore of digital musician Feng Jiangzhou, former vocalist of the Beijing underground band The Fly, expresses an impatient and industrial form of anger. Impatient, given the speed of the rhythm that feels like the pulse of a heart in the midst of a marathon. Industrial, as a range of dissonant noises and a highly transformed voice evoke the feeling of steel factories and of oil drilling machines. In the accompanying video clip, the repetitive beats are juxtaposed with a troupe of Red Guards, who are marching from the right to the left on the screen, caught in an endless loop. The characters *jinse xiyang jinse xiaobian* (Golden Sunset Golden Urine) establish a link between the Great Helmsman Mao, whose Red Guards move across the screen, and urine.

Apart from framing his music as political critique, I would like to read Feng's appropriation of digital hardcore as an act of sonic cosmopolitanism. The generic affiliation creates a cosmopolitan link between Beijing and, primarily, London and Berlin – the perceived centers of digital hardcore. To read this appropriation, or translation, as yet another case of localization runs the danger of getting trapped in a local versus global



Figure 1 Still from MTV Feng Jiangzhou, by Xiao Xue.

dichotomy, and conflating this dichotomy with a “West versus Rest” dualism, hence once again reinstating the West as the center. By reading it as an act of translation, I hope to bring to the forefront how cultural globalization involves a betrayal and pollution of culture. In times of resurgent nationalism such cultural contamination may work as an important counterforce. In this chapter I aim to explore the ways in which contemporary Chinese art and popular culture contaminate both cosmopolitan as well as patriotic be/longings.

I will focus on a Hip Hop band from Beijing, Yin Tsang, who struggles with the ideology of “Keeping It Real” and the related demands of localization. The second case, on the work of Xu Bing, based in New York since 1990, presents a self-conscious visual artist who explicitly interrogates and contests the longing for cultural purity, be it Chinese or Western. The third case, the Hong Kong movie *Kung Fu Hustle* by Stephen Chow, presents an eclectic play with cultural identities. These artists present three different ways to negotiate between cosmopolitanism and patriotism; the first is a case of cultural struggle, the second of cultural criticism, whereas the last pokes fun at any possible culturalism. All these artists, like Feng Jiangzhou, inscribe a sense of Chineseness into cosmopolitanism as much as they inscribe a sense of cosmopolitanism into Chineseness. The resulting proliferation of what I would like to call banal cosmopatriot cultural forms represents a polluted, dirty and contaminated form of cultural be/longings that resist cultural essentialisms.

Cultural Pollution

Inspired by Rey Chow's reading of Walter Benjamin's essay "On translation" in her book *Primitive Passions* (1995), in conjunction with Mary Douglas' by now classic book *Purity and Danger*, I conceptualize cultural globalization as a moment of translation in which both the assumed "original" and its alleged "copy" are being polluted. When reading cultural globalization as the flow of cultural forms, genres, formats, and so on, over time and place – flows that pass through a combination of mediascapes, finanscapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes and ethnoscapes (Appadurai), it is possible to think of a moment and place of departure (imagined as the "original") and a moment and place of arrival (imagined as the "copy"). I need to stress that these moments are as imaginary and constructed as they are contested: following Foucault (79), when we would embark upon a "true" genealogy of the "origin" of, for example, Hip Hop, the streets of the Bronx signify just one moment of a much longer and profoundly bifurcated history of Hip Hop. However, it is equally important that in public discourse and in the imagination of a global Hip Hop community, the streets of the Bronx *do* signify the origin of Hip Hop.

This begs the empirical question: what happens when a cultural form travels from that particular imagined locality (the Bronx) and that particular time (the end of the 1970s) to China? In other words, what happens when an assumed Western cultural form is being translated towards China? When employing the notion of translation I wish to include both the assumed "origin" as well as the alleged "copy" in the analysis. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Rey Chow warns us against the danger of reifying the origin as the real, most truthful source when analyzing cultural translations. Translation not only refers, etymologically, to tradition, it also refers to betrayal (Chow, *Primitive Passions* 182). To insist on interpreting Chinese rock as translation is to insist on the question of betrayal and, in my interpretation, pollution.

This requires, however, further reflection on the relationship between the alleged original and its translation. "It is assumed that the value of translation is derived solely from the 'original,' which is the authenticator of itself and of its subsequent versions" (Chow, *Primitive Passions* 184). Inspired by Benjamin's essay on translation, Chow argues, instead, for an interpretation of translation as "primarily a process of *putting together* (...) a real translation is not only that which translates word by word but also that which translates literally, depthlessly, naively" (185–6).

Consequently, translations may produce meanings that remain invisible or unspeakable in the "original." "Translation is a process in which the 'native' [here: 'Western Hip Hop'] should let the foreign affect, or infect, itself, and vice versa" (*Primitive Passions* 189). The native is infected by the foreign, just like the foreign is infected by the native – thereby polluting the "origin" that has never been pure in itself. A translation consequently transforms and infects, contaminates, as it were – rather than copies – an already and necessarily impure original. In the words of

Benjamin: “a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” (Benjamin 81; see also Maravillas and Boellstorff in this volume).

This idea of translation thus involves a betrayal of both the “origin” and the “foreign.” In other words, it pollutes neat and tidy categories that structure reality. This leads me to the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas who, in her book *Purity and Danger*, explains how societies are structured around specific notions of dirt and cleanliness. A proliferation of dirt is unsettling as it is disruptive of the moral order of society (Tavener 63–85), or, as Douglas writes, “dirt offends against order” (2). This makes an analysis of the dirt that emerges all the more urgent in the act of sonic translation:

We should now force ourselves to focus on dirt. Defined in this way it appears as a residual category, rejected from our normal schemes of classifications. In trying to focus on it we run against our strongest mental habit. For it seems that whatever we perceive is organized into patterns for which we, the perceivers, are largely responsible.... Uncomfortable facts which refuse to be fitted in, we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb these established assumptions.... But it is not always an unpleasant experience to confront ambiguity. There is a whole gradient in which laughter, revulsion, and shock belong at different points and intensities. The experience can be stimulating.... Aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms. (Douglas 45–46)

In using the notion of pollution to grasp the translation of cultural forms towards different cultural contexts, I wish to point to the ambiguities and ambivalences occurring in acts of cultural translation. Whereas the established social orders described by Douglas juxtapose purity with danger, thereby stressing the danger in impurity and pollution, I wish to stress *the danger that lies within purity*. A danger that I, for example, see in the rise of Chinese nationalism over the past decade, a time when, under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party, “we the people” was pointedly replaced by “we Chinese.” The underlying uncritical celebration of a certain pure, unpolluted idea of Chineseness (it is telling that the CCP has launched several campaigns against spiritual pollution from the West) runs the danger of excluding the impure other, for example ethnic or sexual minorities, but also the non-Chinese speaking overseas Chinese (see Lim in this volume).

By using words like impurity, dirt and pollution, I run the danger of getting trapped into their negative connotations. In Appiah’s essay titled *The Case for Contamination*, he argues that “living cultures do not, in any case, evolve from purity into contamination; change is more a gradual transformation from one mixture to a new mixture.... [Contamination] is an evocative term. When people speak for an ideal of cultural purity... I find myself drawn to contamination as the name for a counterideal” (online). My choice for similar terms is driven by parallel concerns: a wish to counter pure longings, coupled

to a desire to employ terms that disturb, rather than comfort. I hope they will not operate as the constitutive outside of purity and authenticity, but, instead, as possible ways to rethink culture in a time of globalization. A rethinking that couples the debunking of purity and authenticity with a cautious celebration of the pleasures of translation.

Banal Cosmopatriotism

Having discussed and hopefully explained the noun in this chapter's title, it is time to move on to a brief discussion of my take on the adjective – which also forms the title of this book. As explained in the introduction to this book, cosmopolitanism and patriotism are often more akin than we may expect. According to Billig, everyday life is saturated with a range of expressions of what he calls banal nationalism. These are, to him, the “ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some supporters have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged,’ in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition” (6). In my view, there seems to be no convincing ground for applying this term to the West alone, as Billig does, as the term is equally applicable in an Asian context. Examples Billig uses are, among others, the unwaved flags that occupy our streets, the rhetoric of politicians, and the newspapers that address their readers as members of a nation, in particular on its sport pages.

We can extend the articulation of the national to other mediated expression as well, such as the daily weather forecast, which can be read as a performance of the boundaries of the nation state (Morley 428). Following Morley, it seems safe to assume that processes of reterritorialization are a response to processes of deterritorialization, and that these have propelled the proliferation of expressions of banal nationalism. However, given the context of what we may call intense globalization, such expressions are, in my view, often profoundly ambiguous or, to stick to the terminology I wish to pursue here, polluted. And this brings me back to the idea of translation: under the current forces of intense globalization, the production of locality, be it in the past, present or future, implicates a moment of translation. Or, to quote Abbas, “the local is *already a translation*, ...so that the question of the local cannot be separated from the question of cultural translation itself” (12, italics his).

Beck claims that we are being confronted in our everyday lives with a range of banal cosmopolitan expressions, ranging from (the often too easily used example of) food to dance music. According to him, in banal cosmopolitanism, “everyday nationalism is circumvented and undermined and we experience ourselves integrated into global processes and phenomena” (12). Yet, how tenable is such a juxtaposition of cosmopolitanism and nationalism? Are they indeed mutually exclusive? Does one subvert the other? I wonder. It is my contention that both often do come together in different forms of popular culture and art (Regev). For example, in the Hip Hop of

Hong Kong collective Lazymuthafucka, the genre itself connotes cosmopolitanism, whereas in the song *1127*, they celebrate Bruce Lee as a role model for Hong Kong youth, which is an articulation of patriotism.¹ By celebrating cosmopolitanism we run the danger of ignoring the possible positive aspects of nationalism or patriotism. Rather than aiming at an uncritical celebration of cosmopolitanism, be it in its banal or its elite forms, I hope to highlight the intricate and polluted ways in which patriotism and cosmopolitanism conflate.

Beck also acknowledges the cosmopolitan *within* the national when he writes that “a cosmopolitan social theory and social science ask about the complicated accommodations, alliances and creative contradictions between the nation-state and mobile capital, between the hidden cosmopolitanization of nation-state societies and national identities and institutions, between cosmopolitanism and nationalism” (26). To tease out the ambiguities of both patriotism (that I deliberately confuse here with nationalism) and cosmopolitanism in a “Chinese” context, and to analyze the workings of processes of cultural pollution in a time of intense globalization, I therefore want to zoom in on cultural expressions that, in my view, can be considered both contaminated and cosmopatriotic. Yin Tsang’s Hip Hop provides a first case in point.

Yin Tsang: On the art of keeping it unreal

The band members of Yin Tsang are keen to sinify their sound and words. Yet, as I will argue, their attempt to indigenize or localize Hip Hop is profoundly ambivalent and contradictory. In my reading, the Chinese Hip Hop of Yin Tsang renders both the idea of Chineseness as well the genre of Hip Hop highly problematic, contested and above all, polluted.

Yin Tsang consists of four members – all male – and released its first album in 2004 under Scream Records. Their album was released at a moment when Hip Hop finally gained momentum in the mainland; in the same year, another Hip Hop group, Sketch Krime, released its album, as did the Beijing collective Kungfoo. I deliberately use the word *finally*, since Hip Hop has made a relatively late entry into the mainland, in particular when compared to rock music, as it only started to gain popularity after 2000. According to a report in Channel V magazine, “If the youth of the 80s were obsessed with heavy metal, the youth of the 90s with punk, then from end 90s up to the present moment, it is Hip Hop that dominates the aesthetics and even life attitudes of contemporary youth. They wear Hip Hop clothes, they choose Hip Hop records, and they spend every weekend at Hip Hop parties” (Anonymous: 100–1). Indicative of the popularity of Hip Hop over recent years is the use of the sounds in commercials by, for example, McDonalds.

When interpreting the emergence of Hip Hop in China as a moment of cultural translation, we can trace different aspects of pollution of both assumed original and its alleged Chinese copy. Hip Hop has its perceived origin in the Bronx of New York, an

origin that is moreover quintessentially ethnic. In China's Hip Hop culture, foreigners play a conspicuous role. Only one out of Yin Tsang's four members is Chinese: MC Webber is a Beijing resident, two members are white Americans, one is an overseas Chinese from Canada.² However, all of the Yin Tsang band members seem eager to perform a Chinese identity by using a Chinese name and by rapping in Chinese. The lyrics of Yin Tsang clearly focus on everyday life in Beijing. The Chinese lyrics of Yin Tsang obscure whether this concerns a "foreign" view or "inside" view. The drive to localization is clear in several songs of Yin Tsang; that carry titles such as "Welcome to Beijing," "Beijing Bad Boy," "S.A.R.S." and "Yellow Road." In their song "S.A.R.S.," Yin Tsang reflects upon the days that the virus controlled Beijing, as they rap:

Frequently wash you hands. Wear a mask, stay away from me, wear gloves, stay physically fit, don't use your hands to touch your face, I have come to invade, call me SARS, I was born in Guangzhou, in that climate I developed a vicious demeanor, who would have guessed, that it would go this far, little old me could make everyone so scared.

The reflection upon everyday life in Beijing localizes the sound of Hip Hop, along with the language of the lyrics. There are further possible signs of localization, like the absence of the ethnic articulation. In China it does not make much sense for Han Chinese to rap about ethnic discrimination (it is remarkable that, until now, the ethnic pull of the rock culture as discussed in Baranovitch does not exist for Hip Hop), nor about the problems of drug use. Gangstarap – with its references to violence in urban ghettos – is strikingly absent in Chinese Hip Hop culture, just as the sexism and materialism of Western Hip Hop is far less conspicuous. Consequently, the choice of topics in Chinese Hip Hop is more mundane, linked more closely to the banalities of everyday life, rather than to street life in the ghettos.

The absence of the ethnic articulation, in particular, could endanger the requested authenticity of Chinese Hip Hop. Those active in the Hip Hop scene often blame the culture for its inauthenticity. Hip Hop is more fashion than anything else in China, they claim. Urban magazines present the latest images in fashion, the new bands from the United States along with images of graffiti in Guangzhou. Compared to Japan and South Korea, China's Hip Hop culture is still considered to be minimal, but its size is increasing rapidly. A large part of the culture represents a fashion statement more than a "real" Hip Hop identity. In the words of editor Himm Wong from *Urban Magazine*: "It's hard to say now, because most Chinese youth are just seeking the superficial kind of culture, and real people, those who study the spirit of Hip Hop, are quite few." The underlying ideology expressed here is crucial in global Hip Hop culture: the insistence to be and remain real, despite and because your authenticity risks being compromised by the forces of, for example, money. When I asked DJ Webber from Yin Tsang how he related to the ideology of "Keeping It Real," he replied:

.... it's related to technique and art. You have to combine the kind of techniques others can't master with the kind of art others don't understand. Then you will get

something new and a sense of – how should I put it? – just keep on doing it, like me, I would create 100 songs and then choose the very best one out of the 100. What is real? What is fake? Basically it's very individual....if you want to keep it real, it's very difficult. Keep on trying, just keep on trying.... (Personal conversation, June 21, 2004)

In its marketing of Yin Tsang, record company Scream refers to the ideology of “Keeping it Real” when they write on their website (www.scream-records.net/):

Fronted by Chinese Hip Hop national champion MC Webber, the group are [sic] insistent on staying loyal to the roots of the genre in the face of what group member Josh Hefferman called, “the McDonaldization of Hip Hop.” (...) Looking ahead, the group hopes to further the education of Chinese towards “true” Hip Hop.

It is quite ironic, to use an understatement, that an American rapper claims to teach the Chinese an allegedly American cultural form (“true” Hip Hop) in order to resist McDonaldization. And this irony points to the pollution taking place here on several levels. First, the composition of bands like Yin Tsang, with the strong presence of “foreigners,” pollutes any attempt to “truly” localize Hip Hop. The US members may signify a “pure” Hip Hop culture, as they come from the imagined homeland of Hip Hop, but, at the same time, they are sabotaging any attempt to make “real” Chinese Hip Hop. Articulations of what Forman terms, in the context of East Coast versus West Coast rap, *the extreme local*, such as references to everyday life in Beijing, are polluted by the inclusion of the non-local in the making and performance of Chinese Hip Hop. In the case of Chinese Hip Hop, the American band members may well be read as signifiers of *the extreme global*. Hip Hop can be considered a deeply cosmopolitan cultural text, its cosmopolitanism both stimulating *and* resisting the localizing urge. This makes a pure signification simply impossible: Hip Hop is bound to be read as a modern, “Western” lifestyle, no matter how eagerly its styles are being localized or indigenized.

Parallel to a pollution of Chineseness, we can also trace an equally important pollution of Hip Hop ideology. The appropriation of Hip Hop by the affluent urban middle class of China is equally indicative of the polluted twist Chinese give to Hip Hop ideology – it challenges the assumed link between Hip Hop and lower class, just like the link between ethnicity and Hip Hop is disrupted in a Chinese context. Condry (169) observes the same for Japanese Hip Hop, which has never been part of a street culture, but, instead, was appropriated by hip middle class youngsters in search for yet another trend. The decoupling of Hip Hop from class and ethnicity; the absence of the ghetto or the “hood;” as well as the erasure of sexism and ostentatious performances of materialism (for a critique on these aspects of Hip Hop, see Gilroy); proves that Hip Hop can be very different from what it is today depending on the dominant imagination.

I am risking stereotyping Hip Hop, since the dominant imagination, which is, in turn, complicated by manifold manifestations much more diverse and often beyond the stereotypical gold chains and near-naked women we know from 50 Cents, just like Eminem, among others, has also contributed to the decoupling of Hip Hop from

ethnicity. Yet, the intensity with which Chinese Hip Hop reifies and yet pollutes dominant Hip Hop stereotypes does challenge Hip Hop ideology and its insistence on Keeping It Real. The proliferation of dirt in Chinese Hip Hop caused by the decouplings discussed, can be read as an art of Keeping It Unreal – thereby challenging the hegemonic discourse on Keeping It Real. Chinese Hip Hoppers are like banal cosmopatriots, yet their appropriations of the cosmopolitan sounds and images of Hip Hop are saturated with ambivalence and ambiguity – polluting both the assumed origin and the alleged copy of Hip Hop.

Xu Bing: Strategic Unmeaning

Born in 1955 into an intellectual Beijing family – his father was a history professor at Beijing University, his mother worked in the department of library sciences – Xu Bing's youth was spent in a very turbulent China. He underwent Mao's simplification of the Chinese language – a simplification that was deemed necessary to ensure a higher literacy rate. However, for Xu Bing, who had just learned the classic Chinese characters, this change proved profoundly confusing. He recalls:

My generation, however, was irreparably affected by the campaign to simplify characters. This remolding of my earliest memories – the promulgation of new character after new character, the abandonment of old characters that I had already mastered, the transformation of new characters and their eventual demise, the revival of old characters – shadowed my earliest education and left me confused about the fundamental conceptions of culture. (in Erickson 14)

Particularly in a Chinese context, where its language is often claimed to embody the essence of what constitutes Chinese culture, Mao's language policy must have left indelible marks on a whole generation. It explains the pivotal role language plays in the works of Xu Bing. After having spent the years between 1974 and 1977 in the countryside for the “re-education” program in Mao's Cultural Revolution, Xu Bing embarked upon his art studies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he earned his master's degree in 1987. Xu Bing stayed and became a teacher at the Academy, where he inspired many students who would become part of the Chinese avant-garde in the 1990s. Xu Bing's works in the 1980s resonated with the “culture fever” that swept across the country, during which intellectuals and artists were involved in a critical debate on Chinese culture and displayed an eagerness to link up with the rest of the world (Li 311–43; Zhang 93–113). The 1989 demonstrations and their subsequent bloody suppression pushed the critical spirit back into its bottle to be replaced by a spirit of economic progress, rather than political and cultural change. At this point, Xu Bing's works, complicated by his involvement with the student movement, became increasingly problematic and therefore marginalized in China. In 1990, Xu Bing decided to accept an invitation by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and immigrated to the United States. He is currently based in New York.

The confusion Xu Bing writes about when reflecting on the introduction of simplified characters may well be read as a moment of cultural pollution, and the literacy campaign of Mao itself a moment of translation: a moment during which the old character system – embodying the old, Confucian and traditional China, is translated towards the new, revolutionary and communist China with its simplified characters. The erasure of tradition and the inscription of the revolutionary illustrate the constructedness and malleability of both language and culture. Xu Bing has pushed this theme further by profoundly polluting language, as becomes clear when we look at three of his works: *Book from the Sky* (1989), *A Case Study of Transference* (1994) and *Square Word Calligraphy* (1999). In these works, Xu Bing has pushed Mao’s linguistic project to the extreme, stripping off the meaning attached to (Chinese) characters and (English) words, thereby producing a linguistic field of unmeaning, to apply a term introduced by Van Crevel (Crevel, “Who Needs Form?”).

For his *Book from the Sky* (see figure 2), Xu Bing has developed his own Chinese characters. Walls, the floor and curtains that are hanging from the ceiling, all are printed with

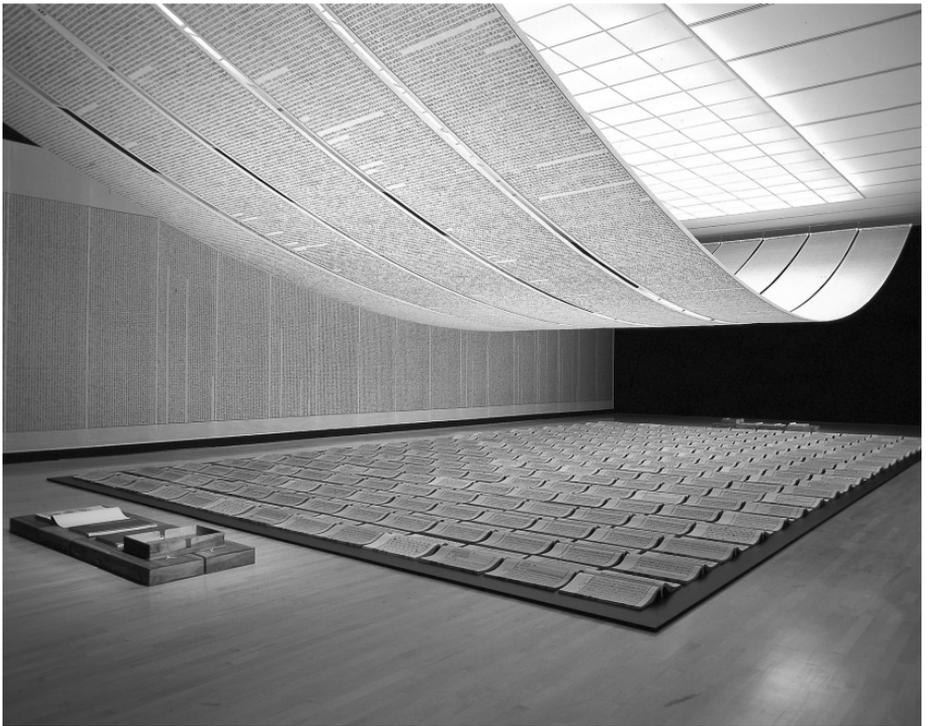


Figure 2 “Book from the Sky” (1997–1991), hand printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls from false letter blocks, installation view at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada, 1998. Copyright by Xu Bing.

what at first sight appears to be traditional Chinese calligraphy. For most Western viewers it will be just that: they enter a dreamlike room saturated with Chineseness, characters signifying China's assumed long history. Chinese viewers may, at first, feel the same, until they carefully examine the characters and discover that they are all invented, these are “fake” characters, devoid of meaning. Whereas Mao simplified Chinese characters in his desire to transform Chinese culture into a new communist utopia, Xu Bing simply erases all meaning inscribed into Chinese characters, what is left are signs that operate as floating signifiers. Xu Bing translates the real into the unreal, thereby betraying and polluting the Chineseness inscribed into the alleged original. The work can be read as a strategic performance of what Van Crevel describes as unmeaning – privileging form over content. Van Crevel (140–41) employs the notion of unmeaning for his analysis of Chinese poetry, and argues that rhythm is a crucial and often underestimated component of poetry – a rhythm that has direct affective access to the body. In Xu Bing's case, I will argue that, rather than sound, the visual aspect – devoid of fixed meaning – propels the direct affective response. The moment the spectator realizes that the visual does not match any existing linguistic system, the initial affective response will be followed by a moment of cognitive puzzlement.

Despite the neat and tidy presentation of the *Book from the Sky* (Xu Bing had made woodcuts so as to be able to reprint his characters as precisely as possible) the result is anything but neat and tidy. What emerge are profoundly polluted Chinese characters that interrogate any desire for meaning. More so, they interrogate the contention that calligraphy is an art form which “traditionally demands a reading knowledge of at least seven different Chinese scripts, a seasoned acquaintance with historically revered authors, and knowledge of famous Chinese calligraphers and their aesthetic accomplishments” (Chattopadhyay 6). The dirt that emerges challenges such essentializing longings; lays bare the arbitrariness of the alleged tradition of calligraphy; and subverts the danger that lies within purity. The piece, instead, confronts the audience with the aesthetic pleasure of a calligraphy of unmeaning.

No wonder that the work received harsh criticisms in China in the early 1990s. Yang Chengyin, a Central Academy professor remarked that “If I am asked to evaluate the *Book from the Sky*, I can only say that it gathers together the formalistic, abstract, subjective, irrational, anti-art, anti-traditional ... qualities of the Chinese New Wave of Fine Arts, and pushes the New Wave to a ridiculous impasse” (in Erickson 41). Xu Bing's friend and art critic Feng Boyi quoted a fellow artist accusing Xu Bing of coming “under the spell of foreign thoughts and [he] abandoned the principle of ‘art for the people’ so as to earn the praise of many people both in his country and abroad. No one can understand his *Book from the Sky* and it has no meaning” (in Erickson 41). Ironically, it is precisely the latter critique that, I believe, Xu Bing wished to provoke. As Erickson (51) explains, “A clear link seemed to exist between his meaningless characters and the meaningless texts that had swamped the Cultural Revolution landscape. There was

a link, too, with more recent meaningless official publications.” Yet, although unmeaning may be close to meaningless, it is not quite the same: a deconstruction of meaning is not meaningless. The linguistic space of unmeaning that unfolds in Xu Bing’s works represents a third space, “which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 55).

In his later works, Xu Bing further pursues his creative endeavor to disrupt and pollute cultural purity. Whereas in *Book from the Sky* the pollution created by Xu Bing’s act of translation involves only Chinese characters, in his provocative performance piece *A Case Study of Transference*, Xu Bing directly links “the West” (signified by fake English vocabulary) to “the East” (signified by the fake Chinese characters we already know from his earlier work) (see figure 3). What we see in this piece are two pigs, though another rendition involves a pig and a model of a human being. Fake English words cover the male pig, whereas the female pig’s skin is printed with fake Chinese characters. The choice of animal renders the work quite literally more polluted, more dirty – as if Xu Bing wishes to emphasize the pollution that already takes place when he translates real English and real Chinese into unreal English and unreal Chinese. During the performance, the audience watches the pigs mating, a spectacle that proved to be both embarrassing and disturbing. This embarrassment added an extra layer to the piece, signifying the anxiety of human beings over their own animal nature and sexuality (Erickson 62). The implied critique on globalization – the West fucks the East in this work – is, to me, not the most intriguing aspect of the work. Rather than the distribution of sexual roles, it is the pollution caused by the act of translation – resulting in linguistic unmeaning – in conjunction with the choice of animals and the uncomfortable viewing experience that gives an edge to the piece. The performance disrupts cultural essentialisms and invites the audience to question not only what constitutes cultural difference, but subsequently also the assumed boundary between culture and nature.

In the final work that I would like to discuss, *New English Calligraphy*, Xu Bing continues to confront his audience with the arbitrariness of ideological processes of signification. In this work, he does not invent a fake language; instead, he transforms English words into what at first sight looks like Chinese calligraphy (see figure 4). In doing so, he again questions alleged cultural differences, by showing how representation techniques that, in popular discourse, are considered quintessentially Chinese, can also be translated towards a Western context, thereby polluting both the assumed origin (apparently neither calligraphy nor the aesthetics of Chinese characters are unique) as well as the copy (rendering alternative representations of the Roman alphabet possible). The basic idea of his new English calligraphy is to turn the gallery into a classroom. Xu Bing explains: “The audience can try to learn these words by following



Figure 3 “A Case Study of Transference” (1994), performance with pigs printed with false text and books, Han Mo Art Center, Beijing, China. Copyright by Xu Bing.

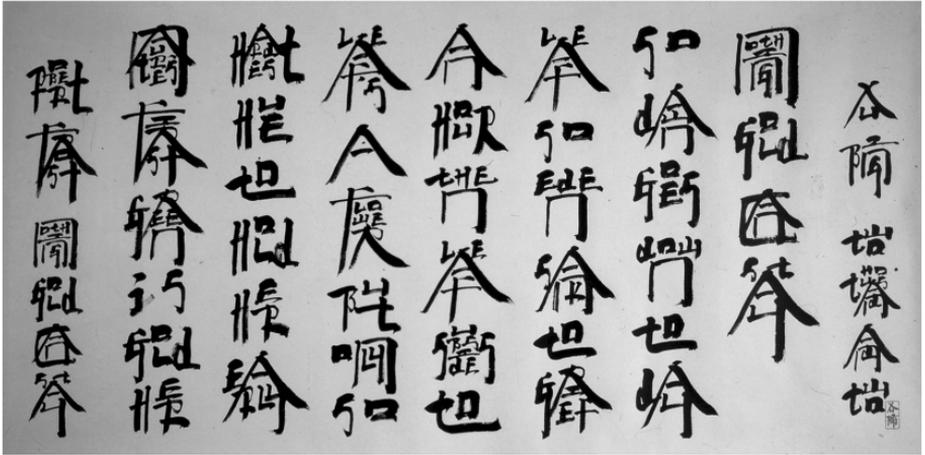


Figure 4 “Square Word Calligraphy: Nothing Gold Can Stay” (2002), ink on paper.
Copyright by Xu Bing.

the ‘Elementary New English Calligraphy Instruction Video’. When people try to recognize and write these words, they begin a process of having to forcefully and constantly readjust their ingrained thinking. During this process of readjustment, and transformation, their former concepts are powerfully replaced and attacked” (in Lin 291).

In his oeuvre, Xu Bing continues to interrogate prevailing notions and imaginations of cultural essence and cultural difference, his works go against the grains of, or betray, any longing for cultural purity. Instead, Xu Bing confronts us with the inherent ambiguities and ambivalences of culture and cultural difference. As Xiaoping Lin observes, Xu Bing “critiques Eastern and Western cultures not as ‘universal values’ but as absurd illusions” (Lin 290). His work confronts us with the arbitrary connection between culture and meaning, and forces us to interrogate the ideological implications, since these absurd illusions do produce even more absurd but real nationalisms. His aesthetic pollutions of cultural essences are visual spectacles that quite deliberately defamiliarize the familiar.

Stephen Chow: Slapstick Nostalgia

When we move from New York to Hong Kong, we encounter quite a different cultural setting, in which the colonial processes of cultural pollution has long been playing a pivotal role. As Rey Chow observes, “were we indeed to follow the ‘quest’ and ‘root’ motifs, no ‘Chinese’ city would have greater reason for existentialist angst than Hong Kong. (...) the history of modern Hong Kong could always be written as some form of quest for a ‘Chinese’ identity that was preempted and made impossible from the beginning, and most significantly by its inerasable colonial ‘taint’” (*Ethics after Idealism* 163). The quest for identity in Hong Kong is bound to remain unsuccessful, even in the decade before the 1997 hand-over, when the city was desperately searching for an identity while being

on the verge of disappearance (Abbas). Yet, as the work of Stephen Chow shows, the impossibility of identity is not quite the same as the absence of identity.

One of the first, if not the first, Hong Kong icons that reached global fame is Kung Fu star Bruce Lee. Almost three decades after this, Hong Kong stars Jackie Chan and Stephen Chow are in many ways the inversion of Bruce Lee: they are clumsy, funny and feminine, and, as one could argue, cater to certain orientalist stereotypes of Asian masculinity.³ What they do share with Bruce Lee, however, is that they are very much signifiers of Hongkong-ness (rather or more than Chineseness), thereby defeating a reading that portrays them as sole signifiers of Western orientalism. Yet, as my analysis of Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* will show, the fervent production of the local in the movie (Srinivas; see also Appadurai; as explained earlier, I view the local itself already as a product of cultural translation) comes with strong articulations of the cosmopolitan; hence my labeling of the movie as a form of banal cosmopatriotism.

Kung Fu Hustle is Chow's second international success, following on his 2001 hit *Shaolin Soccer*. In Hong Kong, Chow has gained a reputation over the past decades and is generally considered one of the most prominent local cultural icons. As Srinivas (289–95) argues, part of his appeal comes from his Hong Kong-ness, exemplified by his oeuvre, often inaccessible to outsiders, and his refusal to move away from Hong Kong. Chow himself claims that his latest blockbuster is a tribute to the Hong Kong Kung Fu films he watched extensively when he was a poor kid living in one of the public housing estates of Hong Kong. The discourse of his own life story exemplifies what can be termed the Hong Kong dream: coming from a poor background, he has turned himself by perseverance and hard work into a star. His movies often attest to his background by foregrounding the heroicism of the poor people and portraying the rich as inherently corrupted.

Let me first quote the story of the movie from its website (<http://www.kungfuhustle.co.uk/>):

Set amid the chaos of pre-revolutionary China, small time chief, Sing, aspires to be one of the sophisticated and ruthless Axe Gang whose underworld activities overshadow the city. Stumbling across a crowded apartment complex aptly known as "Pig Sty Alley," Sing attempts to extort money from one of the ordinary locals, but the neighbours are not what they appear. Sing's comical attempts at intimidation inadvertently attract the Axe Gang into a fray, setting off a chain of events that brings the two disparate worlds face-to-face. As the inhabitants of the Pig Sty fight for their lives, the ensuing clash of Kung Fu titans unearths some legendary martial art masters. Sing, despite his futile attempts, lacks the soul of a killer, and must face his own mortality in order to discover the true nature of the Kung Fu master.

What strikes me in this summary is the conspicuous absence of Hong Kong, the place is simply referred to as a city in pre-revolutionary China. This erasure is indicative of the earlier mentioned preempted, impossible identity of Hong Kong. The locality in *Kung Fu*

Hustle is particularly relevant: the community of poor people lives in a compound called *Zhu long cheng zai* (Pig Sty Alley), a sly reference to the Kowloon walled city of Hong Kong, *Jiu long cheng zai*, which was a notorious no-man's land, caught between a political and legal dispute between the mainland Chinese and the British administration in pre-hand-over Hong Kong. It is a place generally remembered as the most chaotic, anarchistic and romantic place in the history of Hong Kong. This piece of no-man's land is also a perfect symbol of Hong Kong's being perpetually in-between Britishness and Chineseness – a disposition that, after the hand-over, has slipped towards being in-between a non-defined Western-ness and Chineseness. The pollution of Hong Kong identity finds another visual expression in the clothing styles of the two gangs: the Crocodile Gang is made up of Mandarin-speaking, “traditional” Chinese costumed Northerners, and is being kicked out by the Cantonese-speaking Axe Gang, consisting of Southerners that wear formal Western suits, at times even with formal Western hats.

Rey Chow refers to this disposition as follows: “What is unique to Hong Kong, however, is precisely an in-betweenness and an awareness of impure origins, or origins as impure” (*Ethics after Idealism* 157). Hong Kong can thus be considered the material embodiment of an act of post-colonial translation; it signifies the polluted, the impure and the culturally ambivalent. *Kung Fu Hustle* is saturated with references to that impure longing that we may coin as Hong Kongness. Let me single out three of them. First, the three hidden Kong Fu masters that live in the compound work as a coolie, a tailor and a congee seller – professions that all carry a sense of Hong Kongness. Second, the evocation of old Hong Kong comes back in many images, like the manual beating of a cotton blanket, the water ration due to severe draughts (a reference to Hong Kong in the 1960s), old-fashioned shops that no longer exist, old-fashioned posters, comic strips in a barber's stall – they all convey a strong nostalgic longing for that impure sense of Hong Kongness. Third, in a flashback the younger Sing is being cheated to buy a manual on “Palm Kung Fu,” a reference to a classic Kung Fu film that almost every kid in Hong Kong has watched.

The latter example is just one out of many: *Kung Fu Hustle* may well be termed an intertextual minefield. The references to both Hong Kong's cinematic past as well as to Western Hollywood cinema abound. The references directly and intimately draw the viewer into the text. As Srinivas argues: in *Kungfu Hustle* there is a “production of a particular intimate star-spectator relationship that furthers the sense of ownership of these films” (294). To name but a few references to Hollywood cinema: many fight scenes are spectacularly *Matrix*-like, and the Axe Gang members, all clad in black suits, are reminiscent of the multiple Mr Smiths in *The Matrix*. On the other hand, *Kung Fu Hustle*'s action choreographer Yuen Wo Ping was also responsible for the choreography of *The Matrix* (as well as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and Tarrantino's *Kill Bill I and II*), which both explains and complicates the intertextuality: a Hong Kong production incorporates references to Hollywood, and these references refer back to

Hong Kong Kung Fu aesthetics. *Kung Fu Hustle* is like an intertextual hall of mirrors, where the search for origins has become utterly futile, where one translation follows the other, propelling an eruption of dirt that renounces any longing for cultural essence. In one of the opening scenes, the Axe Gang starts dancing as if they were playing in a musical, intercepted by black and white images characteristic of detective films. In another scene, Sing's lips, bitten by a snake, blow up to inhuman proportions, while later he jumps high into the sky; both are references to *The Hulk* (and in particular its cinematic adaptation by Ang Lee). When the Kung Fu masters are attacked by *guzheng* musicians (a Chinese string instrument), monsters that we know from *The Mummy* emerge from the instrument.

Amidst this intertextual minefield, a field that seduces the audience into a performance of one's cultural capital and affluence, a strong undercurrent of nostalgia evokes images of a Hong Kong that has never been and will never be. Drawing on Rey Chow, Helen Hok-sze Leung argues that "nostalgia is not simply a yearning for the past as though it were a definite, knowable object. Rather, nostalgia involves 'a sensitivity to the movements of temporality.' Understood in these terms, a nostalgic subject is someone who sits on the fence of time" (430). The nostalgic imagery in *Kung Fu Hustle* points at the passing of time, at the colonization and re-colonization of Hong Kong, at a sense of loss of that which has never been there in the first place. What remains are the floating signifiers of Hong Kongness like Bruce Lee. In the apotheosis of the movie, Sing (in a reference to, once again, *The Matrix*) shoots up to the sky to prepare for his final battle with the enemy "The Beast." He returns to the beast with the unbeatable Palm Style Kungfu. His white shirt breaks open, posing only with dark Chinese pants, half-naked, typical of Bruce Lee's image. Here it seems like Bruce Lee is brought back to life – gone are the earlier mentioned orientalist debunkings of Chinese masculinity, what we see is an attempt to recuperate a sense of Hong Kongness. The Beast realizes that he is bound to lose the battle. When Sing asks him if he would like to learn the Palm Style, the beast acknowledges his defeat. Sing's generosity refers to the Confucian ideal that the truly virtuous has no enemies.

And so Bruce Lee meets Confucius at the end of the movie. It is a meeting that evokes a nostalgic longing for Hong Kongness, a longing bound to remain unfulfilled. An impossible, preempted longing, fraught with dirt and pollution, since Hong Kong itself is the product of cultural translation. The words in the previous two sentences are, indeed, rather theatrical. I write of unfulfilled longings, impossible longings, preempted longings, as well as of dirt and pollution, of nostalgia. What has remained untouched until now, is the humor that runs through all the melancholy that the other words may have evoked. The viewer is captured by carnivalesque laughter, one that celebrates rather than mourns the impossibility of the Hong Kong identity, one that pokes fun at all possible essentialisms that are currently so *en vogue* in Chinese culture. To further appropriate Bakhtin, I see *Kung Fu Hustle* opening up the heteroglossia of everyday

life, challenging the authoritative discourses of both Chineseness and postcolonialism by joyfully celebrating that strange anomaly Hong Kong, that city with 5000 minus 4850 years of history, that city that was born again in 1997, that city that will remain forever adrift.

Conclusion

My journey, from the art of Keeping It Unreal of Yin Tsang; via the strategic unmeaning in the art works of Xu Bing; to the slapstick nostalgia of *Kung Fu Hustle*; has, I hope, been illustrative for the spatial and cultural ambivalences inherent in contemporary art and popular culture. Although my focus has been on “Chinese” art and popular culture, conceptually I hope that my juggling with terms like translation, pollution and betrayal, in conjunction with banal cosmopolitanism, will prove useful in other cultural contexts as well. Whereas Beck places banal cosmopolitanism *vis-à-vis* banal nationalism – and clearly favors the first – I have argued that, often, they come together. To understand this strange bastard cosmopolitanism, I have used the idea of translation, an idea that inspires me, following Benjamin and Chow, to think of cultural forms in terms of pollution and betrayal. In a time when nationalisms of all kinds reign high – among which, a Chinese nationalism that legitimizes the Communist Party – and when popular discourse is drenched with dramatized accounts of assumed clashes of civilizations, it becomes a pressing matter to point at the dangers that lie within purity. And, subsequently, to cautiously explore the possibilities of impurity, and I deliberately write cautiously here, so as to remain alert and aware of the ambivalences and contradictions that also lie within polluted cultural forms.

My analysis of Hip Hop group Yin Tsang shows that even when one aspires to sinification, one is joyfully haunted by cultural pollution. An American rapping in Chinese so as to help Beijing musicians resist McDonaldization – this mission alone hints at betrayal. I have shown how the decoupling of Hip Hop from class and ethnicity challenges dominant Hip Hop ideology, just like the involvement of foreigners, the multilingual lyrics and the cosmopolitanism intrinsic to Hip Hop culture all challenge the Chineseness of Chinese Hip Hop. Xu Bing prefers to disrupt rather than construct Chineseness in his work. He deliberately and forcefully debunks any essentialist longing. In his oeuvre, he literally screws around with language and its alleged intricate link to cultural essences. In *Kung Fu Hustle*, filmmaker Stephen Chow embarks upon a phantasmagoric cinematic play ridden with intertextual references over time and space. A Hong Kong street gang starts dancing as if they were in *Singin' in the Rain*, while fight scenes bring to mind *The Matrix*, the Hollywood blockbuster that, itself, is heavily informed by alleged “Hong Kong Kung Fu aesthetics.” At the same time, the *mis-en-scene*, the plot, as well as the characters, all bring back nostalgic memories of a pre-hand-over Hong Kong. The movie portrays anything *but* a clash of civilizations. In an intertextual carnivalesque spectacle, *Kung Fu Hustle* shows how the nostalgic

coupling of cosmopolitanism to patriotism may not only pollute and betray any longing for cultural essences; it may also open up avenues to rethink (and poke fun at) Chineseness and its alleged Others. Such a rethinking would necessarily lead to issues of memory and nostalgia, as well as to mediations on longing and belonging. Despite the inherent ambivalences, in our current times of pure longings, it becomes necessary to insist on reading culture as an act of translation and to acknowledge, if not celebrate, the importance of dirt and cultural impurity.

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Notes

1. The chorus of the songs runs: "We had Bruce Lee teach us we are not the disease of Asia. Though having yellow skin, we can still be ourselves. Do not follow, copy, and be like the other. Do not look down upon ourselves.... The spirit of Bruce Lee will never die and the Chinese will never forget that" (from www.wikipedia.org).

2. Sketch Krime, a MC who moved from Yunnan to Beijing, works with four MCs from France, Britain, Japan and the United States. The mixture of nationalities is negotiated in different ways: the guest MCs on Sketch Krime's CD rap in English, French (*Beijing, mon territoire!*) and Japanese.

3. Along the same line, the fame of American Idols star William Hung deserves further analysis. His image as a nerdish, bookish (he is a student of civil engineering at UC Berkeley) and anything but sexy Chinese singer, one who sings notoriously false, is indicative of a highly problematic Western gaze on Chinese masculinity – one hinting at the lack thereof. Interestingly, Hung strikes me as if he *deliberately* acts upon prevailing images that depict Asian men as such, also making it possible to read his performance as indicative of the productive empowering force of stereotypes, as discussed by Rey Chow (*The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). Also see his website: www.williamhung.net.