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Translanguaging and visuality: Translingual practices in literary art

Abstract: Translanguaging is a resource for linguistic creativity in communication and for critical engagement with one's sociolinguistic or sociocultural reality. This article examines how translanguaging operates in two visual art installations by the contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing. *Square Word Calligraphy* takes a visual turn on translanguaging by inventing a hybrid calligraphy that incorporates English words into the orthographic frame of Chinese. By physically tracing the alphabet through the character, viewers gain an embodied translingual experience, which encompasses an intercultural imaginary negotiating and transcending the English-Chinese divide. By contrast, *Post Testament* demonstrates an intralingual mode of translanguaging, whereby a biblical text is inflected with heterogeneous registers and rendered ineffectual as coherent discourse. Here the encounter and intertwining of text registers create a transformative space replete with ambiguity and mayhem. In these radical works of language art, translanguaging delineates borders while simultaneously interrogating them, creating liminal zones and articulating a politics of (mis)recognition, (un)readability, and (in)communicability.

Keywords: translanguaging, visuality, Xu Bing, *Square Word Calligraphy*, *Post Testament*

Translanguaging describes the various formations of dynamic communicative practice whereby multilingual language users deploy and interpret linguistic and non-linguistic resources across semiotic boundaries. It is not very often conceived as a textual phenomenon (see, however, Canagarajah 2011); for the most part it has been studied in relation to naturally occurring interactions such as conversations among bilingual individuals or in the context of bilingual education (Lewis et al. 2012; García and Li 2014). Themes that have emerged from these studies include the construction of fluid identity positions and transnational social spaces among multilinguals (Li and Zhu 2013; Li 2011) and, from a cognitive perspective, the conception of translanguaging as a form of dynamic bilingualism

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where an individual activates features from a single linguistic repertoire rather than from two autonomous or interdependent linguistic systems (García 2009). This article takes the discussion on translanguaging into an alternative direction by associating it with text, specifically the aesthetic text. More precisely it looks at how translanguaging functions in literary art as a critical rhetorical resource, whose function is to construct a transcultural imaginary and/or to resist hegemonic discourses; in either case, translanguaging turns a text into a meta-commentary on language and communication issues, as well as into a politicised and deterritorialised space that resides in the liminal.

1 Translanguaging and the aesthetic text

The phenomenon of using more than one language in writing has been in existence since time immemorial. At a most elementary level this involves codeswitching.[1] In fiction, the interplay of two or more linguistic codes may be indexical of identity roles such as class or group membership (Hoffer 1981; Evans 1981). It also functions as a textualisation of the tension between cultures situated in an asymmetrical power relation, where there is often an "implicit association of the superordinate language with the negative qualities of an oppressive regime" (Alzevedo 1993: 230; see also Blommaert 1993). In postcolonial literature, heterolingual codes can take on similar identity connotations, creating a jarring effect in order to bring across a political message in respect to race and ethnicity (Gordon and Williams 1998).[2]

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[1] In translanguaging literature, scholars have variously attempted to differentiate translanguaging from codeswitching. For example, García has maintained an epistemological difference between the two phenomena, contending that translanguaging should be seen as the selection of features from a continuous semiotic repertoire, as opposed to the *switching* between two discrete language codes (García 2009; Garcia and Li 2014: 22–23). While I do not disagree with this conception, I prefer to see codeswitching as a specific instantiation of, rather than a distinct category from, translanguaging. In other words, translanguaging in this article is a superordinate category; it is a discursive *effect* semiotically realised in such material practices as codeswitching, translation, intersemiotic transposition, etc.

[2] Some scholars have tended to treat codeswitching in fiction as a mimesis of real-life multilingualism (Omole 1987; Camarca 2005); others have shown that textual codeswitching exhibits grammatical and discourse patterns that resemble those found in naturally occurring speech (Callahan 2004). While these studies justify the use of textual data in codeswitching research, they also invalidate the specificity of the written text vis-à-vis spoken data. I subscribe to the view that textual codeswitching is premeditated and non-spontaneous (Davies and Bentahila 2008: 3); in literature and art, such premeditation and non-spontaneity afford codeswitching and other translanguaging practices a higher degree of deliberation and greater space for rhetorical manoeuvre.

Thus, translanguaging can become "languaging actions that enact a political process of social and subjectivity transformation which resist the asymmetries of power" inherent in institutionalised language usage (García and Li 2014: 43). This means that a translanguaging space (Li 2011) is also a politicised space, a space for the encounter and negotiation of different forces. In written discourse, translanguaging can be used as a rhetorical and ideological tool to resist the homogenising influence of hegemonic languages (e.g., Canagarajah 2011). To Mignolo (2000) translanguaging can participate in a call for political action and social transformation. This is especially true in post-colonial contexts, where a deliberate flouting of linguistic boundaries may serve to reassert the presence of subaltern knowledges, hence "redressing the asymmetry of languages and denouncing the coloniality of power and knowledge" (231).

But translanguaging entails more than the selection of features from two or more languages within a piece of discourse. My conception of translanguaging is informed by the notion of *the translational* (Lee 2015), a rhetorical figure that encapsulates various kinds of semiotic transference and border crossing (130–131); these would include such phenomena as codeswitching, translation proper, intersemiotic translation, translingual writing, and transdiscursivity. The translational constitutes a space of hybridity, within which transactions occur between semiotic domains normally conceived as discrete and independent. Such transactions may or may not manifest themselves in prima facie multilingualism; that is to say, a text can be apparently monolingual (in the sense of being written using a single code) but de facto translingual, in that its monolingual surface-texture belies more than one linguistic and/or cultural layering. An example of such a translational text, reported in Lee (2015), is Taiwanese poet Chen Li's (1954 –) practice of translingual writing: witness how Chen, in his brand of poetry recycling, randomly selects words from Carol Ann Duffy's "The Love Poem" to create a new English poem in the structure of a haiku, and then translating the latter into Chinese (153). Even though the final text as we see it is monolingual, it is intercultural and hybrid in its genesis: a new Chinese poem, embedded in a Japanese literary form, is borne out of an original English poem. It is a translational text whose production is inflected by three linguistic-cultural strands, which qualifies it as an instance of translanguaging.

Translanguaging is also a multimodal affair, as we are dealing not just with the space between languages but also beyond language as such. This is where the "trans" prefix in the term "translanguaging" takes on the dimension of "going between and beyond (linguistic) systems and structures, including different modalities (e.g. speaking, writing, signing), and communicative contexts

or spaces" (Li and Zhu 2013: 519; Li 2011: 1223). Complex communicative practices are often intersemiotic; they operate not only through the interaction between verbal signs, but also that between verbal and non-verbal signs, or even that between different non-verbal signs, all of which are formations of translanguaging. From the perspective of multimodal semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), verbal language is seen as one of several semiotic resources available to the language user. This opens up an entire range of potentialities for meaning-making, which is not solely dependent upon verbal semantics, but also contingent on the specific configuration of text, mode, and medium in a particular communicative situation. Needless to say this view is especially pertinent to visual art, where non-verbal signification is central. An example of this type of translanguaging at work is the co-substantiation of poetry and interactive design. In a cross-modal and cross-disciplinary project in Hong Kong, for example, images in a set of poems appear in both verbal and visual modes, and the reader interprets a poem by concurrently interacting with its corresponding installation piece (Lee 2015: 132–138). Another example is Taiwanese artist Shen Bo-cheng's tripartite technological artefact *Read, Art*. The work plays with the idea of translation by transposing written texts into Braille code, and then the latter into sound (by way of reeling a music card made by punching holes according to the earlier Braille pattern) (Lee 2015: 138–145).

Translanguaging, then, is a crucial resource for linguistic creativity in communication practices in general and aesthetic practices in particular, where linguistic creativity refers to "the language user's ability to play with various linguistic features as well as the various spatial and temporal resonances of these features" (García and Li 2014: 32). In addition it can also become a resource for critical engagement with one's sociolinguistic or sociocultural reality (Li 2011). The rest of this article explores this theme in respect to two visual texts by the contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing (b.1955). My choice of texts is motivated by the fact that visual texts are not usually used as test cases in applied linguistics; by locating my discussion of translanguaging within a visual-verbal context, I wish to highlight the complex semiotic transactions involved in avant-garde aesthetics, whose experimentations go beyond the verbal plane. Xu Bing's visual texts are often not purely visual either, but include strong verbal and even kinaesthetic elements as well; such mixed-media works exemplify the multimodality of translanguaging in all its potential. His signature works of language art demonstrate the "mixing and meshing not just [of] different language codes and writing systems, but [of] different genres, materials and locations" (Jarworski 2014: 84), which makes them exemplary texts for our conception of translanguaging.

In the following I employ two conceptual routes that can lead us into different aspects of translanguaging art: transvisuality and transdiscursivity.[3] The former describes the "slippage" or sliding between orthographic forms; this pertains to the writing systems of different languages, which, in terms of their materiality, are fundamentally visual. My premise is that that the orthographic patterns of a language – be it alphabetic, syllabary, or logographic – constitute its basic visuality, and that this material-graphic visuality can be metonymically extended to represent the primary visuality that underpins a linguistic culture. What happens when the primary visualities of different cultures mesh or slide into each other? The second term refers to the juxtaposition of registers and discourses within a piece of work. The assumption here is that all registers and discourses are institutionalised; as such, they are imbibed with values (e.g., whether a certain register is *appropriate* to a certain communicative setting, whether a certain type of discourse belongs to the realm of *high* culture, etc.) pertinent to the particular site in which they are produced, circulated, and consumed. What happens when disparate discourses and/or registers are made to come together, and "weave" into each other, in a work that pretends to be coherent?

Focusing on transformative shifts in visuality and discursivity, I ask the following questions: does translanguaging obtain a single dominant function in the interaction between visuality and verbality in Xu Bing's art? How does it articulate its own space, viz. a translanguaging space within the discursive-semiotic make-up of multimodal installation art? How does it participate in the narrative of the artist's aesthetic trajectory as he traverses different geopolitical and sociocultural spaces?

2 Tracing the alphabet through the character: transvisuality in *Square Word Calligraphy*

Figure 1 shows a banner advertising Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994) at a MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) exhibition in 1999. At first glance, and especially from afar, the four graphs on the banner look like ordinary Chinese

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3 Other corollary notions, not directly dealt with in this paper, include *translingualism*, which involves translanguaging either at a textual-verbal level, i.e., codeswitching, or as an immanent layering (cf. Lee's [2015] concept of "the translational"); and *transaurality*, involving slippage between sounds in different languages or dialects. For examples of these two operations in poetry, see an analysis of Taiwanese author Chen Li's works in Lee (2015: 69–76).

Figure 1: Square Word Calligraphy, MoMA, 1999. Source: Xu Bing Studio.

characters. On closer inspection, however, these "characters" turn out to be undecipherable to the Chinese viewer: they are apparently Chinese but ultimately not recognisable as such. The greater irony is that upon scrutiny they turn out to be recognisable to the English viewer; they read, albeit in a highly defamiliarised visual: Art for the People.

Cognitive effort is required on the part of the viewer to make out these letters-disguised-as-characters. (Note, however, that without being told that these are in fact letters, one may not even begin to decipher them, which turns these graphs into non-entities that do not register as linguistic signs in the viewer's cognition.) Invariably, viewers are first bemused, and then, after tracing out each letter successfully through the calligraphic moves, are struck by

a shock of recognition that they are reading a phonetic language under the cover of a logographic one. In this cross-language simulacra, each stroke is crafted as if it were part of a Chinese character, when in fact it is part of an alphabetic letter. In Figure 1, the two diagonal strokes at the top of the first graph are made to look like the Chinese pictograph-radical *ren* 人 and would in the first instance be misrecognised as such by an unsuspecting Chinese viewer. It turns out, however, that further down there is a horizontal stroke joining the two diagonals, which immediately turns the alleged radical into a non-character and into the letter "A". In the second graph, the structure on the left, which is the letter "F", resembles the radical *guang* 广; notice how the first horizontal stroke is deliberately shortened so as to parody the dotted stroke on top of the Chinese graph. The last graph has a "P" on the left with an elongated stem, meant to mimic the Chinese pictograph ß.

Such are the deceptive manoeuvres that Xu Bing adopts in inventing his special brand of orthography, known as square word calligraphy or new English calligraphy. Here translanguaging occurs as visual diglossia, where the structure of the Chinese character and that of the English alphabet mutate and slide into each other, as mediated through calligraphic brush strokes. Each word-character formation then becomes what Vinograd (2011: 98) calls a "liminal space", an interstitial site that emerges out of the transfiguration of different script patterns. It is also language – or better still, *interlanguage* – "thingified" (Jarworski 2014: 84), fossilised in the material form of a transvisual script. This script is a monstrosity (and several of these translingual word-characters do look literally monstrous; see Figures 2 and 3): it is English encompassed within the visual framework of Chinese orthography, at the same time as it demonstrates a distinctly Chinese visuality infused with English phonetics. Each "Chinese" character can be read aloud, but what comes out of the reader's mouth are English sounds. In this reading of English *through* Chinese, a phonemic-graphological slippage arises between the perceptual (the visual gestalt of the "character") and the cognitive (the phonetic deciphering of letters and words). The composite graphs therefore embody an intersemiotic operation, where one transits between the spatial-architectonic structure of Chinese characters and the aurality-orality of English letters.[4]

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4 This is more than a sensuous transition; it may involve culture-specific modes of thinking. The Chinese historian Ge Zhaoguang has remarked that the pictographic nature of Chinese characters has given rise to a tendency toward intuitive understanding based on visuality – in Chinese, *wangwen shengyi*, literally "to look at the text and derive meaning"; see Ge (2014: 113–114n3). *Square Word Calligraphy* takes an interlingual twist on this, where *wangwen* (to look at the text) leads to *shengyi* (to derive meaning; to interpret), but in a different language.
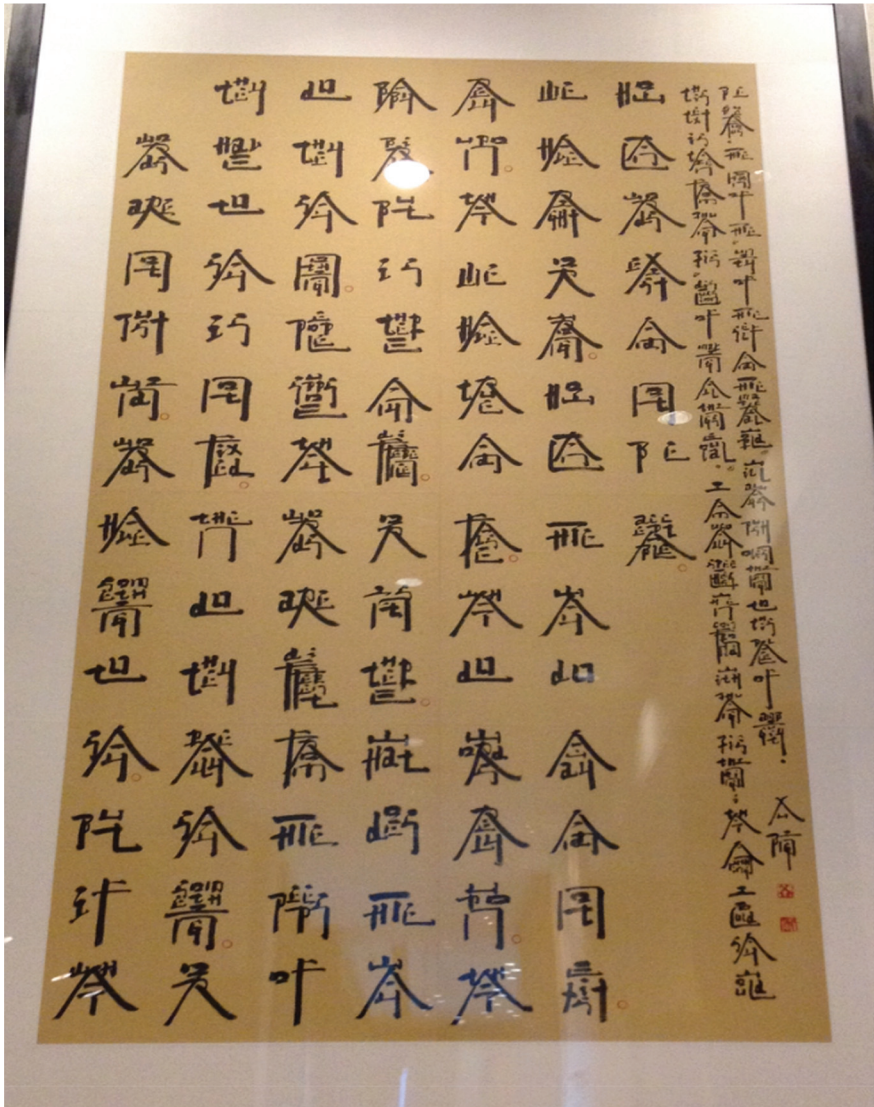
Figure 2: Zhuangzi's "Discussion on Making All Things Equal" in new English calligraphy. Exhibited at "It Begins With Metamorphosis: Xu Bing", Asia Society Hong Kong, 8 May-31 August 2014. Photograph by author.

Figure 3: Instruction manual (top) and tracing book (bottom) for the classroom installation of *Square Word Calligraphy*. Source: Xu Bing Studio.

The visual deception and distortion that characterise *Square Word Calligraphy* inevitably calls to mind Xu Bing's earlier and most famous installation piece, *A Book from the Sky* (1988). Indeed the former work must be properly understood through its intertextual connection to the latter work. In *A Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing devises pseudo-Chinese characters by combining calligraphic strokes in aberrant but conceivable configurations; the resulting graphs look just like orthodox Chinese characters, especially when seen from a distance, but turn out to be unrecognisable, illegible formations when observed closely. Viewers, in particular those who have at least some knowledge of the Chinese language, are thus tricked into believing that they are about to read some proper characters, only to realise with frustration that they cannot understand a single one of them.[5] *A Book from the Sky* returns Chinese language and culture to the base materiality of its script while stoically blockading any meaning or message from coming through this script. It delivers a visual performance in non-communication, where a seemingly familiar code fails to convey any expected meaning; by inscribing meaninglessness (in terms of lexical semantics) unto themselves, the unrecognisable graphs undercut the institution of language and its attendant assumptions about the viability of linguistic communication and cultural continuity (Link 2006; Lee 2015: 100–106). This facilitates a politicised reading of the work, where the deconstructed characters are seen to embody the artist's negative response to Chinese language and culture, particularly in light of the Tiananmen Incident (see Abe 1998).[6]

Conceptually, *A Book from the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy* both operate with the motifs of misrecognition and unreadability, but with a difference. *A Book from the Sky* creates an involutionary loop, where unreadability leads the gaze of the viewer from a site of non-meaning to the graphological-material origins of language. The misrecognition of Chinese characters ensues in non-recognition, and hence the termination of any illusion of meaning. In *Square Word Calligraphy*, by contrast, the initial misrecognition leads to non-recognition (of Chinese) and then to *re-recognition* (of English). Here translanguaging opens up a "line of flight", to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's term; instead of folding toward itself into a closed discursive loop, the visual sign flees from itself, that is to say, "deterritorialises" itself, escaping its own boundary through visual transition into another language. This semiotic move has immense implications for the epistemology that bears on the work. Whereas *A Book from the Sky* assumes a

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5 For images of *A Book from the Sky*, see http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/ 1987/book_from_the_sky (accessed 21 August 2015).

6 Note that this is a retroactive interpretation, as *A Book from the Sky* was conceived one to two years before the 1989 Tiananmen Incident.

pessimistic stance toward the integrity of linguistic meaning, *Square Word Calligraphy* intimates the possibility of communication by recourse to the alternative route of visual metamorphosis.

This difference in stance becomes even clearer when we consider another related work by Xu Bing, entitled *A Dictionary of Selected Words from* A Book from the Sky (1991). As evident from the title this is an extension of *A Book from the Sky*. It is a translational text that shapes itself in lexicographical form. As in a dictionary, there are on the one hand selected pseudo-characters from the parent work; on the other hand, there are purported pinyin transliterations of these words, followed by a series of meaningless "definitions" in "English". These definitions are couched in randomly jumbled letters that render the word strings nonsensical, as if they were a form of encryption. What we have here is a tongue-in-cheek dictionary of pseudo-Chinese explained in pseudo-English. In this instance, translanguaging functions as an empty façade, sustaining the act of interlingual communication through mock-translation – here the visual frame of a dictionary is crucial – while perennially invoking non-sense. Juxtaposed with *A Book from the Sky*, translanguaging in *A Dictionary* becomes an ironic tool to extend the aesthetic of uncommunicability in the former work (Lee 2015: 106–107). In *Square Word Calligraphy*, by contrast, translanguaging takes on a substantial role: it diverts and slides the Chinese script – which in *A Book from the Sky* curves toward its own corruption – into a different linguistic trajectory, exposing it to orthographic inflection (graphological translation). Notably these inflections are all systematically executed; there is even a glossary or visual guide to describe the patterns of corresponding mutation from stroke configurations to the alphabet (e.g., the *shan* 山 radical translates into "W", the *kou* 口 radical translates into "O", etc.).[7]

As in naturally occurring speech, translanguaging in literary art does not occur in a vacuum or out of pure intuition. The sociolinguistic motivation behind the conception of *Square Word Calligraphy* lies with the cultural environment in which Xu Bing finds himself. Xu Bing left China for an artistic career in the U.S. in 1990, which was after he created *A Book from the Sky*. As a Chinese artist working in an English-speaking country, he felt a deep sense of cultural dislocation. There he experienced an identity crisis: while Chinese was his mother-tongue, his working language was now English, which he was not thoroughly comfortable nor familiar with. This in-betweenness became manifested in his hybrid orthography, which was a response to his own cultural condition at the time. According to Xu Bing, if he had continued to work in

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7 For an image of such a glossary, see http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1994/square_calligraphy_classroom (accessed 19 August 2015).

China, *Square Word Calligraphy* would never have come about (Xu 2014: 151). Translanguaging in literary art is therefore always a critique of a broader linguistic-cultural context in which a particular piece of work is produced. In *Square Word Calligraphy* this critique tends toward the positive. Here translanguaging serves as a metaphor for cultural translation at the same time as it functions as a material channel through which the primary visuality of the Chinese language is re-semiotised into a different visual order. This creates a new figurative space of communication that negotiates the representational systems of two languages, thereby hinting at the potential for coeval existence, mutual transformation, and re/bi-culturation.

It seems, then, possible to posit this narrative as we move chronologically from *A Book from the Sky* to *Square Word Calligraphy*: the former represents the regression of a rich culture toward anarchy, and points to a disillusionment on the part of the artist in respect to the tenability of linguistic communication; the latter transgresses the institutionalised boundaries of what defines a language visually, suggesting that the solution lies in breaking out of cultural trappings and opening up to slippage and transformation. The two variables that underscore the difference between the two works are the artist's physical trajectory from China to the U.S. and the translingualism of the latter work. Consequently it comes as no surprise that *Square Word Calligraphy* has evoked a very different interpretation among critics than *A Book from the Sky*, particularly along the lines of East-West fusion. The meaning of the work can also shift subtly according to the specific site where it is displayed. For example, its 1997 Hong Kong exhibition is said to have "achieved its full potential as a poignant message of hope for the future at its Hong Kong venue" (Erickson, n.d.). Here "hope for the future" can refer to the encounter and interaction between different cultures in Hong Kong, which due to its colonial history is often seen as the gateway between East and West.

In *Square Word Calligraphy*, translanguaging is not merely encapsulated within discrete translingual graphs; it is also employed as a technique in transvisualising entire discourses. Using his new English calligraphy, Xu Bing has transcribed several existing works, including Robert Frost's poem "After Apple Picking", Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself", the work of Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei, Bob Dylan's lyrics, nursery rhymes, quotations from Mao Zedong's talk at the Yan'an forum on literature and art, and an excerpt from Zhuangzi's philosophical treatise "Discussion on Making All Things Equal", among others. In each of these cases, translanguaging produces aesthetic tension by defamiliarising the visual interface of familiar works or genres, simultaneously consolidating and estranging the viewer's linguistic sensibilities. Frost's English poem would thus look rather more like a Chinese poem, whereas in the case of Zhuangzi and

Wang Wei, a Chinese classical text in English translation recoils unto itself through being cast in a Chinese-English script.

Figure 2 shows an image of Zhuangzi's text in new English calligraphy. This is a text about the nature of language, particularly apt in our context; indeed it turns the calligraphic work into a metatext. The display largely adopts the paratextual-material conventions of calligraphic scrolls. However, although the scripts are read from top to bottom, conforming to classical Chinese reading habits, they are also arranged from left to right in line with alphabetic writing (such that if we unknowingly start from the right, we will be reading the text from the end). In addition, faint punctuation marks, which are non-existent in Chinese calligraphy, are visible in red (Chinese-style full-stops only, even where question marks are applicable). This meshing of writing/reading conventions exacerbates the visual irony: we are in effect reading a calligraphic version of the English translation of a Chinese philosophical text, in a hybrid top-down/left-right fashion. This text is quintessentially *translational*, not just because it is factually a piece of translation proper, but more importantly because of the various layers of interlanguage tension set up within its very texture.

An even more critical aspect of the display is that it entails painstaking reading labour. Deciphering a single hybrid graph in new English calligraphy is relatively easy; interpreting an entire text written with those same graphs is quite another matter. One only needs to try reading the text in Figure 2 (smoothly, as one would read an ordinary English text) to experience the laboriousness. The main text reads as follows, left-right and top-down. Note that the question marks appear in the calligraphy as full-stops.

> Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn't there? What does the Way reply upon, that we have true and false? What do words rely upon, that we have right or wrong? How can the Way do away and not exist? How can words exist and not be acceptable?[8]

In order to cipher this underlying text, one would need to literally *work out* each graph, as one would a mathematical puzzle. The work involved is not merely cognitive-perceptual; there is a sensuous element, as one would probably need to read out each phoneme (even silently), go through some trial-and-error, and

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8 "In addition to this main text by Zhuangzi, there is a side note by Xu Bing, also written in square word calligraphy: This text is taken from Zhuangzi's *Discussion on Making All Things Equal*. I am often speechless when confronted with Zhuangzi's thinking; that everything I could say would be superfluous. The notion of the "unity of the self and the material world" will always push one's thinking into this place of ambiguity."

accrue them into well-formed words. This would be especially challenging if one tried to read the whole text while standing in front of the artefact, hung on a wall at the exhibition venue. One may also need some tools to help him/her trace the letters through calligraphic shapes; this can be anything from a simple pencil-and-paper to a computing device. I personally had to take a photo of the artefact in Figure 2 and enlarge each graph on the screen of my iPad before I could work them out properly into the Zhuangzi text.

This emphasis on reading labour is not trivial; it serves to underline the fact that Xu Bing's translanguaging is not merely discursive but *embodied*: by tracing and tracking the translingual graphs with a commitment of physical effort, one literally *performs* a transcultural act. Illustrative in this regard is an instruction manual, titled *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, on how to write new English calligraphy, which Xu Bing has created using new English calligraphy itself (Figure 3, top). To obtain a coherent sense of the instructions, one would need to paradigmatically decrypt the English word camouflaged behind each hybrid script following a set of matching conventions, and then combine these syntagmatically into a discourse. In this impeded and strained reading procedure is embedded the process of learning the new script. This new script thus takes on a meta-discursive role, where it materialises a full-length discourse about itself.

With this instruction manual comes a companion tracing book (*Square Word Calligraphy Red Line Tracing Book*) on which users can practice writing the translingual script (Figure 3, bottom). Which brings us back to my earlier point about embodiment and performance: translanguaging manifests itself not only in the materiality of the artefact, but also within the interactive setup of a mock classroom. This "classroom" is an implement built into the space of an exhibition hall that induces the viewer to literally enter the installation. The physical setting turns the viewer into a learner-participant, who is seated in front of a desk, equipped with ink, brushes, and the manual and tracing book mentioned above. A video titled "Elementary Square Word Calligraphy Instruction" is played on a screen in front of the room, after which the viewer-participant starts practising the new script using the given books. In other words, this installation is not only viewable but also eminently *doable*, in which case the viewer is not merely a viewer but also a reader-cum-practitioner of the new writing art.[9]

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9 *Square Word Calligraphy* has also been introduced into schools (Xu 2014), where the classroom installation in question turns into a real-life entity. Other interactive versions of the work include *Square Word Calligraphy: Computer Font Project* (1998) incorporating *Your Surname*

The hands-on approach offered by *Square Word Calligraphy* demonstrates that translanguaging is not merely a static visual effect in art; it is as much a discursive performance, to be enacted through the physical act of the viewer-participant, who is to become the embodiment of a transcultural sensibility. One's initial response to the installation may vary according to his/her linguistic and cultural disposition, but after moving through the calligraphic exercise, this disposition would have been more or less negotiated. A predominantly English-speaking individual may at first be disconcerted by the way alphabetic orthography is being distorted beyond recognition, and then after some practice be intrigued at the systematic convertibility between calligraphic strokes and alphabetic shapes. A predominantly Chinese-speaking individual, on the other hand, may initially be tricked into misrecognising the pseudo-characters as characters proper, and then be pleasantly surprised that traditional calligraphy could be used to render an alphabetic language.[10] At the end of the day, these two individuals with different language affiliations – no doubt idealised, hypothetical models – would have shifted toward a kind of middle cultural ground, where their initial, largely monolinguistic dispositions are moderated by a translingual sensibility and sensitivity. Importantly, all of this is experienced through the body of the viewer-participants, who are also in an ethnographic sense persons-in-the-culture, wherever the exhibit is on display. This drives home the point that translingualism is not an abstract, intellectual entity, but a dynamic cultural process that can and should be instantiated.

Xu Bing's translanguaging, then, underpins the ethical stance of his new English calligraphy. The significance of his translingual graphs extends beyond the written word, even beyond verbal language as such, to encompass an intercultural imaginary that cuts across the boundary of English and Chinese. This imaginary is reified in the diglossic interface of the word-character, which represents the site of encounter and mediation between two languages. In transcribing entire texts in the new script, Xu Bing further creates a new discursive space for transculturation. (This point gains further significance in light of the fact that today Xu Bing has a concurrent presence in both China and the U.S. While continuing to run his New York studio, Xu Bing has been

Please (1998), where participants key their surnames into a computer program, which transfigures these surnames in square word calligraphy; see Tomii et al. (2011: 169–170).

10 In this connection, Xu Bing once commented that: "The Chinese people would be especially happy [with *Square Word Calligraphy*], because I transformed English into Chinese" (Xu 2014: 150). This was in response to a question from a U.S. audience as to whether the Chinese would feel offended by his distortion of Chinese into English. Here the mutual bi-directionality of the linguistic conversion is itself telling of the transcultural sensibility underlying the work.

Vice-President of Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art since 2008, which points to his embeddedness in the art institutions of both worlds.)

Transculturation, as Maria Tymoczko (2007) tells us, is the "*performance* of the borrowed cultural forms in the receptor environment" (121; emphasis in original). In the case of *Square Word Calligraphy*, this receptor environment is itself mobile, always shifting with the site of exhibition of the installation; this means that what is to be considered the "borrowed cultural form" also shifts. If the installation is displayed in China or some part of Greater China, for example, a viewer-participant might perceive himself or herself as writing *Chinese calligraphy written in English*, the latter being the foreign or borrowed element; if, conversely, the exhibition is held in a predominantly English-using region, the same script might be seen instead as *English words written in Chinese calligraphy*, where the latter is borrowed as a stylistic font. There is no doubt a degree of simplification here, but this characterisation of the work nonetheless underscores an immanent bi-culturality that is mutable and transformable, depending on the perspective of the viewer/performer. Just as in naturally occurring interactions, multilinguals translanguage through actual exchanges with one another by tapping into a single hybrid repertoire, so in *Square Word Calligraphy* translanguaging is a situated practice and embodied experience, where the viewer-participant traces and negotiates, through his/her body, the orthographic slip from the Chinese character to the English alphabet as a visual continuum.

3 Adulterating the Bible: transdiscursivity in *Post Testament*

Earlier I posited a narrative that goes like this: as Xu Bing moved from China to the U.S. in the early 1990s, his aesthetic sensibility shifted together with a change in his language ideology. Whereas in *A Book from the Sky*, created when Xu Bing was still in China (and shortly before the Tiananmen Incident), the artist expresses a negative response toward Chinese language and culture, *Square Word Calligraphy*, created after his migration to the U.S., reflects a positive vision of language and communication, and suggests the possibility of East-West fusion.

This narrative needs qualification. It is problematised, first and foremost, by the simple fact that *A Book from the Sky* has been exhibited in galleries and museums all over the world till today, alongside *Square Word Calligraphy* and other works. Hence a linear narrative that hypothesises a neat evolution from one language ideology to another can be problematic, given that works with

different, even contradictory, orientations are displayed in tandem. A more nuanced picture would be one that instead considers seemingly conflicting positions as co-existent and synchronous, thereby acknowledging the duplicity and layered-ness of an artist's ideological disposition.

Shortly before *Square Word Calligraphy*, Xu Bing produced an intriguing installation with the title *Post Testament* (1992). *Post Testament* comprises three hundred bound volumes. Each volume is 570-pages thick, imbued with the aura of old European manuscripts through being made with a special kind of paper called *zhengwen* paper,[11] complete with hand-sewn leather binding. Paratextual details, including the layout, font type, and the use of Roman numerals in chapter headings, give us the impression of a fully dignified and grandiose text (Figure 4). And Chapter I begins with this:

> The at book daybreak, of my the face generation still of turned Jesus to Christ, the wall, son and of before David, I the had son seen of above Abraham. Abraham the begat big Isaac; window and curtains Isaac what begat tone Jacob; the and first Jacob streaks begat of Judas light and assumed, his I brethren; could and already Judas tell begat what Phares the and weather Zara was of like. The Thamar; first and sounds Phares from begat the Esrom; street and had Esrom told begat me, Aram; according and to Aram whether begat they Aminadab; came and to Aminadab my begat ears Naasson; deadened and Naasson distorted begat by Salmon; the and moisture Salmon of begat the Booz atmosphere of or Rachab; quivering and like Booz arrows begat in Obed the of resonant, Ruth; empty and expanses Obed of begat a Jessie; spacious, and frosty, Jesse pure begat morning; David as the soon king; as and I David heard the king rumble begat of Solomon the of first her tramcar, that I had could been tell the whether wife it of was Urias; sodden and with Solomon rain begat or Roboam; setting and forth Roboam into begat the Abia blue.

Surely this is perfect gibberish: every single word is recognisable to an English reader, but because of the strange collocations and apparent lack of syntax, the whole text is anomalous and inexplicable, no more than a haphazard cluster of biblical names. As it stands, the passage is incomprehensible, and the regality of the books' appearance only serves to underscore the irony of their nonsensicality. The frustrated viewer of the installation may well stop here and declare it an impossible specimen of language, in which case the interpretation of the work comes to an end. But the text can *become* readable, though not without some commitment on the part of its reader. If we look closely at the passage above, it is composed of a repetitive structure: "and (proper noun) begat (proper

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11 This kind of paper was used in China before the Cultural Revolution to print the English version of Mao Zedong's writings. The combination of China-made printing paper, English texts, and European-style binding is itself a material form of translanguaging.

Figure 4: *Post Testament*. Source: Xu Bing Studio.

noun)", although they are interspersed among other words. If we sieve out this structure from the above passage, this is what we will have:

> The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram; And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon; And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse; And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias; And Solomon begat Roboam; and Roboam begat Abia; … (Matthew 1, King James Bible)

And when the remaining words are collapsed, the following passage emerges:

> At daybreak, my face still turned to the wall, and before I had seen above the big window-curtains what tone the first streaks of light assumed, I could already tell what the weather was like. The first sounds from the street had told me, according to whether they came to my ears deadened and distorted by the moisture of the atmosphere or quivering like arrows in the resonant, empty expanses of a spacious, frosty, pure morning; as soon as I heard the rumble of the first tramcar, I could tell whether it was sodden with rain or setting forth into the blue. (Proust 2006: 453)

The unreadable text, as it were, is formed by weaving together two separate texts, more or less by every other word. The first extract above is from the King James Version of the New Testament, on the genealogy of Jesus (Book of Matthew); the second from Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, in English translation. If we start with the Matthew passage and interchange every word with a word from the Proust passage (i.e. one word from Matthew, one word from Proust, one word from Matthew, and so forth), and move along the two texts in tandem, what comes up is the gibberish excerpt cited above. Clearly these belong to very different text-types, viz. religious vs. literary. One also observes a confounding of registers, where archaic English (*thou, behold, ye, unto*) is mixed with a more modern, elegant English, as in the following excerpt from Chapter III:

> And of as intelligent they people departed she from was Jericho, merely a great lady multitude like followed any him. And, other behold, the two name blind Duchesse men de sitting Guermantes by signifying the nothing, way now side, that when there they are heard no that longer Jesus any passed duchies by, or cried principalities; out, but saying, I have had mercy adopted on a us, different O point Lord, of thou view Son in of my David. And manner the of multitude enjoying rebuked people them, and because places they this should lady hold in their furs peace: braving but the they bad cried weather the seemed more, to saying, me have to mercy carry on with us, her O all Lord, the thou castles Son of the David. And territories Jesus of stood which still, she and was called duchess, them,

princess, and viscountess, said, as what the will figures ye carved that over I a shall portal do hold unto in you?

Using the same method of collating every other word, this can be broken down into two passages from the same sources above, as follows:

> And as they departed from Jericho, a great multitude followed him. And, behold, two blind men sitting by the way side, when they heard that Jesus passed by, cried out, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, *thou* Son of David. And the multitude rebuked them, because they should hold their peace: but they cried the more, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, *thou* Son of David. And Jesus stood still, and called them, and said, What will ye that I shall do unto you? (Matthew 20, King James Bible)

> [I knew quite well that, to many people] of intelligence, she was merely a lady like any other, the name Duchesse de Guermantes signifying nothing, now that there are no longer any sovereign Duchies or Principalities, but I had adopted a different point of view in my method of enjoying people and places. All the castles of the territories of which she was Duchess, Princess, Viscountess, this lady in furs defying the weather teemed to me to be carrying them on her person, as a figure carved over the lintel of a church door[12] holds in [his hand the cathedral that he has built or the city that he has defended]. (Proust 2006: 471)

It is interesting to note that both of these sources are translations, and that they are stitched together to create the image of an authentic English text. Those familiar with *A Book from the Sky* would not be too surprised by this optical trick, but whereas in the earlier work Xu Bing plays with the visual corporeality of the Chinese character, this time he corrupts the English language at the level of discourse. The work may recall Lewis Carroll's famous nonsense poem "Jabberwocky", appearing in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). But whereas "Jabberwocky" coins lexical strings by combining letters in new permutations while generally respecting English syntax, in *Post Testament* there is no syntax to speak of if one reads linearly, which means no meaning accrues across the word sequences. At the same time, however, each word stands as a valid entry in the English language, which gives the text its uncanniness, where plain, familiar words build up into a meaningless text.

Xu Bing uses an eclectic array of miscellaneous texts to adulterate the New Testament. If Proust's novel can still be considered a "classic" work of world literature and an emblem of "high culture" (notwithstanding that these descriptors are an effect of literary institutionalisation), Xu Bing also draws from contemporary pulp fiction as a mixing ingredient; the result is a constant

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12 The phrase "lintel of a church door" seems to have been replaced by "portal" in Xu Bing's text; earlier on "people of intelligence" is replaced by "intelligent people". The minor discrepancies are possibly due to different versions of Proust's translated novel that Xu might have consulted.

shuttling between a revered, ecclesiastical language and a coarse vernacular of a violent and erotic nature (Gao 1993). The religious text is also shot through with a 1985 *Wall Street Journal* article on U.S. income tax in the early twentieth century. In Figure 4, the last paragraph in the left column is formed by alternating, generally word-by-word, this passage from the newspaper article:[13]

> For one thing, Congress didn't pass the implementing legislation until Oct. 3, 1913, which meant that the handful of officials and clerks authorized by the act had too much to do in too short a time. No tax forms were available until Jan. 8, even though the deadline for submission was March 1 …

with this one from the Bible:

> [And it was at Jerusalem the] feast of the dedication, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch. Then came the Jews round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not… (John 10, King James Bible)

A very different kind of diglossia is at work here than in *Square Word Calligraphy*, consisting of the interweaving of strands from text-types of contrasting orders – religious, literary (serious and popular), journalistic, etc. This creates a complex fabric of signs that forces the reader to repeatedly move in and out, up and down – the latter because of perceived values of "high" and "low" associated with biblical and secular registers respectively. Translanguaging, in this case intralingual, fragments the constituent texts at the same time as it threads them together into a different creature. Even though the work can be viewed as an installation artefact and therefore need not be studied closely, in order to fully appreciate the translanguaging act, a viewer *must* put in effort: this involves (as I have done above) teasing out the constituent texts that underlie a selected stretch of the texts, doing some research to identify their respective origins, and then twisting them back together in the way the artist did. This hands-on reenactment of the creative process enables one to experience unreadability from the vantage point of readability, that is, how two perfectly comprehensible texts written in one language can turn into a textual monstrosity when they are sewn together.

Since all discourses are institutionalised, we are really talking not at the level of words and registers but discourse-worlds. On the one hand, there is the New Testament, which forms the matrix text in Xu Bing's work; on the other hand, there are the various secular texts that intercept this matrix text, cutting in

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13 Written by Thomas V. DiBacco and cited in https://www.soundmindinvesting.com/articles/view/when-form-1040-was-brand-new (accessed 22 August 2015).

and out of it, thereby dismantling its organicity. If we accept that the Bible is a hegemonic discourse representing power and authority, then the secular discourses (not a unified entity in itself) represent heterogeneous forces that continually resist, disrupt, and destabilise this dominant discourse, rendering it incoherent and ultimately dysfunctional. *Post Testament*, then, is a textual imagining of ideological contestation in the real, sociolinguistic world. Translanguaging in this case takes the specific form of transdiscursivity: the encounter, intersection, and intertwining of discourses to create a hybrid, transformative space replete with textual ambiguity and mayhem. The outcome is a convoluted discourse that *uncommunicates* meaning. By refusing to provide a resolution to the clash of registers, by allowing the texts to stand inscrutable, Xu Bing advances a confrontational view toward the relationship between cultural forces struggling against each other for dominance.

   This theme is further developed in *Cultural Negotiations* (1992), which combines *Post Testament* with *A Book from the Sky*. This hybrid installation takes the form of a large conference table lined with chairs; on top of the table are sprawled hundreds of opened books belonging to two sets. The first set consists of 300 Chinese-style bound manuscripts inscribed with made-up characters; the second set consists of 300 Anglo-Saxon-style bound volumes full of jumbled texts, as in the examples we have just seen. Translanguaging is here taken outside the confines of text, discourse, and the book; instead, it structures the materiality of the entire installation, assuming as it does a spatial dimension in the plain juxtaposition of two translingual sets of incomprehensible texts on the conference table. In this emplacement of two languages alongside each other without any suggestions for translation, a schism ensues. The grim message is, of course, that it is not possible to negotiate the East-West gap, even if the two cultures in question are in close proximity. Spatial translanguaging therefore produces discursive rupture, embedded within the close-range encounter of different languages.

4 Conclusion

In the two artworks discussed above, translanguaging does not evince a single rhetorical function. On the one hand, it signals visual continuity between two systems of orthography and therefore two systems of cultural representation; on the other hand, it marks discontinuity between registers, signalling a final breakdown in discourse. In each case, the motif of misrecognition is at play, though with very different implications: with *Square Word Calligraphy*, a hybrid

script is first misrecognised as a logographic character and then *re-recognised* as an alphabetic letter; with *Post Testament*, however, a hybrid discourse is first misrecognised as familiar and then *unrecognised*. These different cognitive paths point to contrasting critiques on the plausibility of language and communication. In the former work, a Chinese character is unexpectedly transposable into an English letter, through visual manoeuvres with the materiality of the script; this opens up a figurative route of intercultural movement at the same time as it creates a composite (Chinese-English) visuality in the form of English calligraphy. In the latter work, the descent from the mirage of proper writing to the cacophony of textual disorder deconstructs any illusion that language "works". Considering that the two works are basically contemporaneous (first created in the period 1992–1994), they should be seen as concurrent nodes with different trajectories within Xu Bing's oeuvre. Taken together, they reflect a degree of dilemma and ambivalence in the artist's on-going interrogation of the East-West dynamic, dovetailing toward an emerging transnational-transcultural visuality.

In the final analysis, translanguaging is central to both the conceptualisation and material constitution of these radical works of language art, articulating a politics of (mis)recognition, (un)readability, and (in)communicability. Whether by creating slippage and transition between the visual representations of languages, or by criss-crossing texts belonging to contrasting registers, it "creates a kind of third narrative that limns the border between avant-garde literature and visual art".[14] Translanguaging spaces constitute a "third narrative" whose existence as a pristine site of in-betweenness signals the presence of other relatively well-formed spaces. Therefore, like the "third spaces" of cultural translation in migratory midlands (Bhabha 1994), translanguaging *limns* or delineates borders and simultaneously challenges and transcends them, turning these into liminal zones of creativity and criticality.

One of those borders to be transcended is the disciplinary one. A translanguaging perspective on literary art, by conjoining applied linguistics with visuality, locates the study of language use beyond the usual comfort zone of linguists. This exemplifies the transdisciplinary aspect of the prefix "trans" (Li and Zhu 103: 520). In this regard, this article has attempted to take translanguaging into the realm of literary art, with a focus on two kinds of diglossia, namely the visual transformation between orthographies and the heterogenisation of discourse. This is particularly pertinent today in view of "the continued flowering of indigenous and vernacular genres of verbal art in the context of a growing

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14 Artist's statement on *Post Testament*; http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1992/post_testament (accessed 24 August 2015).

recognition of multiculturalism and language diversity" (Francis 2014, n.p.). With the proliferation of intercultural experimentation in the creative arts, the interface between translingual poetics and applied linguistics has emerged. Francis (2014) suggests, apropos of language learning, that "bilingual poetry (and bilingual literacy in general) is considered today as a resource that favors the development of advanced proficiency in all realms of language use" (n.p.). This interface is only just beginning to be explored; the cross-fertilisation between psycholinguistics, bilingualism, and literacy studies on the one hand and aesthetic practices on the other remains a fruitful prospect to be furthered.

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