



INTERVIEW

Snapshots of Book Art In Asia

by Alisa Golden

I had several students from Japan and Korea in my artist's book class at the San Francisco Art Institute, which caused me to wonder if or how they might continue their book studies once they went back to their home countries. Were people practicing traditional crafts there? Were artists who had studied bookmaking abroad teaching in Asia? Was the book as an expressive art form emerging independently? What could I tell my students? (pictured to the left is Xu-Bing's "Square Wood Calligraphy" writing in the Red-Line Tracing Book)

Thoughts of Asia seem to be in the air. In the United States, exhibits of book art from Asia were popular in 2006. A show was held at the San Francisco Center for the Book called "Found in Translation: Art and Language in Global Culture," curated by Marshall Weber, artist and dealer of Booklyn, in New York. The New York Public Library showed "Ehon: The Artist and the Book in Japan," curated by Roger S. Keyes, visiting scholar at Brown University. A two-part show called "Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art" was presented by curator Wu Hung at the China Institute in Manhattan. Locally, San Francisco artist and teacher, Charles Hobson, chose "Orient" as the theme for a show he curated at the Donna Seager Gallery in San Rafael, California. East met West in culture as well as at the coasts; these shows were either in California or New York.

In the virtual world I was able to meet book artists from both coasts as well as one living in Korea, one in Hong Kong, and several in Japan. The following article consists mainly of excerpts from email interviews I conducted with all of them between January and March of 2007. It's a bit awkward to research a country to which one is not culturally tied, especially when one doesn't speak the language. In order to discover what was happening in Asia I had to comb the internet and ask around for English-speaking artists who still had ties to their countries of origin. I was most interested in the perspectives of those who had lived in two places. I asked each artist similar questions and lightly edited and grouped their responses.

CHINA

One artist that I should have known of, but didn't, I discovered by chance. After reading a review of "Shu" in the New York Times, January 2007,

I was particularly taken with the work of Xu Bing (www.xubing.com). I liked his work before I found that he was famous: he won a MacArthur in 1999 (printmaking and calligraphy) and, in 2004, he was awarded the Artes Mundi, one of the largest international prizes in the world. I wondered how widely his work was known amongst book artists and sent email to more than fifty colleagues, artists, and librarians asking if they had heard of Xu Bing. Surprisingly, only fifteen of the group had: 30%. Those who did were located mainly in New York, where he lives and is represented, and those who had met him or seen his work in galleries or museums.

I wondered what Xu Bing thought of book art in general and if he considered himself a book artist. He had come from China to the University of Wisconsin, which is considered to have a strong book art program. I wrote to Xu Bing. He responded in Chinese to his assistant, who then translated and typed out his answers. I began by asking if there was any contemporary book art in China before he left in 1990.

Basically there was no concept of "book art" in China at that time. In addition to my work *Book from the Sky*, there was also a work called "新刻度小组" created by Chen Shaopin, Wang Luyan, Gu Dexin, etc., and Huang Yongpin's "洗书," [1987, "The History of Chinese Art" and "A Concise History of Modern Art" after Two Minutes in the Washing Machine] a performance work in which he placed a volume of Western contemporary art history and a volume of Chinese art history in a washing machine [and exhibited the pulped books on a broken glass in an open, used, wooden box].

Book from the Sky was very well received when it was first shown, but at the time I was unaware of the

idea of the "artist's book." However, when I moved to Wisconsin in 1990, I began to learn about that concept, and was often asked to participate in book art-related exhibitions and activities.

I have never thought about whether I am an 'artist' or a 'book artist.' I have never looked at art from the perspective of materials, technique or style. I use whatever materials best express my idea at a given time. Because of my generational and personal background, my training in printmaking and my particular interest in language, I have a natural connection to books. My work and standard 'artist's books' are not entirely the same: usually artist's books are visually striking, with strange binding, etc. and do not necessarily resemble books. On the other hand, my book works appear as normal books, and only their contents diverge from the norm."

Although he says that he hasn't thought about what he calls himself, he seems to want to make a division between his works and his idea of artist's books. On the one hand, the term "artist's books" encompasses many more works than he suggests, and on the other, his *Tobacco Project* fits the definition he gave. One part of the project, for example, contained cigarettes with text on them in a case.

The Chinese written language has great appeal to Xu Bing both as language and image; from his work you can see that he is interested in and inspired by that relationship. I asked him if he was also inspired by any writers, artists, or other works of art. He responded that he is interested in "Buddhist approaches to carving, binding, paper use, printing, etc... Also the Chinese attitude towards books during the Cultural Revolution had a significant impact on my work, more so than any artist or artwork."

The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and lasted for ten years. Summarized (which isn't simple since 20 million people died either from food shortages or were killed), the Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, worked to banish the idea of the individual and to erase old thoughts, ideas, and culture by collecting all of the old books and destroying them, replacing them with just one: Mao's "Little Red Book." Students read this one book, over and over.

After Mao died in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping took over by 1978, modern growth in industry and agriculture was encouraged, as were cultural and scientific exchanges with the West. New books were imported and any old books that had not been destroyed were re-circulated. This explosion of new culture propelled several artists, Xu Bing included, to create striking works of art where they could deal with their feelings about books and reading. Xu Bing describes in "Shu," "...I read so many different types of books. But after reading so much, I didn't feel well. It was like being overstuffed." In Chinese art history this period

of time is called "85 Art New Wave."

Although Xu Bing lives in the United States, he is still connected to China through his art and his past experiences. He clearly has strong feelings about the gravitas of the traditional Chinese book, but he also has "...long wanted to present an exhibition of Western book art in China, and have even discussed this idea with curators, but, for numerous reasons, it has never been realized."

Since he is still connected to the country, I asked if he knew of any places in China that taught bookmaking. He did not, but he said,

The majority of my book works have been produced in China, but I have made use of traditional Chinese and contemporary bookbinding factories, where I met with their craftsmen one on one. Because my works were unlike the books they had created in the past, I spent a good deal of time working with them directly, teaching them, and discussing the projects.

China has a unique history of bookmaking. The connection between Chinese characters and the visual is also quite unique. So I believe that China will make a very significant contribution to book art in the near future.

After I received answers from Xu Bing, I tried to find artists from other Asian areas who either still lived there or who maintained a cultural connection, either because of frequent visits, or by identifying with the culture artistically. In most cases, through these artists I was able to locate centers of art activity where experimental bookwork might be found. Many of the artists I interviewed cited Xu Bing as an inspiration to them.

Both Judith Hoffberg, librarian, curator, and creator of *Umbrella* magazine, and Bill Stewart, of Vamp and Tramp Booksellers, mentioned **Michael Cherney** (www.qiumai.net), a photographer and Sinologist, who was born in New York, but today lives and makes books in China. He began studying the Chinese language in 1988 and studied and traveled back and forth between the US and China until 2006, when he relocated to Beijing with his wife Dong. By merging new and old, Michael integrates the traditions of Chinese craft with modern technology: Chinese culture with a Western-tinged view. His work, *Albums from the Bounded By Mountains Series, 2004-2006*, shows his photography on *xuan* paper. In an email interview I asked him about his perspective as an American making books in China.

...I began as a photographer making traditional prints; I began to utilize the accordion-fold book as this is a format that has existed in China since the 7th century; it felt to be the appropriate format for my experiments at joining photography with a traditional

Chinese art aesthetic. No text is added except for titles, but sometimes words are the subject matter of the photograph... My work is a bit difficult to classify. (I'm happy about this!) The same series of works has entered the collections of various museums and libraries as artist books, as photography, and as Asian/Chinese art.

When one studies Chinese history, one's sense of scale is completely transformed. What seems to be an important political matter in the present day can be seen as an eventual historical footnote in centuries or millennia to come. With my photography and art I try to record moments that convey a sense of the current moment within a greater historical perspective.

Michael wrote that some of his key influences are "Xu Bing, the painter Wang Lu (Chinese, early Ming dynasty), and the hand scrolls of Koetsu and Sotatsu (Japanese Rimpa school, early 17th century)."

Regarding bookmaking classes in China, he cited Prof. Lu Jingren of Qinghua University who "runs a contemporary book art studio." If you search the internet for Lu Jingren you will find him described as "a world class, award-winning book designer." In the photographs his books show strong shapes and forms, clean graphics, and materials related to the content. His resumé indicates he studied in Japan; his incorporation of ideas and techniques from around the world are apparent.

I wondered what kind of a vision Michael had for book art in China. He said,

... I would like to see more recognition and support of the people and cottage industries that are committed to maintaining top quality craftsmanship (such as papermaking, binding, etc.).

...China is the wellspring for much of what eventually became "the book" or "book art" to the rest of the world. Still, in today's world it is inevitable that modern contemporary artists and book artists in China are influenced by external traditions ... as well as by their own tradition. In many cases Chinese tradition is not utilized at all. My work is, in part, an effort to balance this emergence by offering a joining of perspectives from the other direction.



Michael Cherney's *Albums from the Bounded By Mountains Series, 2004-2006*

After hearing from both Xu Bing and Michael Cherney, reading the catalogue from the China Institute (which I highly recommend) and my daughter's tenth grade world history book (which I do not recommend), it became very clear that I could not force my notion of book art on what was happening in China today. Any idea of bringing Western ideas of book art there seem superficial, in a sense, because of the country's deep, and at times conflicted, history with the book. While I do believe a show of Western books would inspire another way of thinking, just as an exhibit of any new work and ideas for anyone would, the book as an expressive art medium, as Xu Bing wrote, will continue to develop "naturally and independently."

HONG KONG

Although Hong Kong is now under Chinese rule, Hong Kong was under British occupation until 1997, which undoubtedly had an impact on the culture. Part of the Sino-British joint declaration was that Hong Kong would maintain its autonomy from the rest of China. In the 1990s, according to the Hong Kong Museum of Art website (www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Arts/english/intro/eintro.html), artists "sought to respond to the challenges of history, politics and livelihood by employing different creative media. It was at this time that the definition of Hong Kong art in the context of Chinese culture also became an important issue."

Ed Hutchins told me about his studio assistant, **Elsie Sampson** (www.chinesesweatshop.com), who came here from Hong Kong in 2000. She thinks of herself primarily as a book artist. Elsie's connection with Ed shows up in

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her choice of book structures such as a crossed flexagon for *Folding Memories*, and her newest books (2007) folded from single sheets of paper, called, *PLAY...with a sheet of paper*. Her desire to make books began in Hong Kong at an early age. I asked her if she knew of any place that taught bookmaking in Hong Kong, and how or why she got involved in making books.

...In fact, I used to teach at a handicraft place where they have soft toys making or some sewing classes. When I visited a few years back I suggested that I could teach some kind of bookmaking/binding classes. The response from the staff and owner was "who would wanna learn how to make a book/journal when handmade journals (I think they refer to those from India, Malaysia or China) cost so little money?"

I remember cutting up my mother's collection of interior design magazines and making scrapbooks before I knew the word "scrapbook," or what it means. I was a little girl who didn't care anything about home decor, but thought the beautiful pictures that will make a "good personal book!" (Of course, my Mom got really upset when she found the holes in her collection!)

I started making journals for myself in 2000. I carried my visual journals around all the time and found that lots of people are interested in my books, only then I realized I could 'edition' my books/writing and present them as art. I knew very little about book art then.... Therefore, like everyone who journals, any little things in life inspire me. I would write a full page plus image just about a candy that a friend gave me or a quick ten-minute walk in a park or a man who I saw everyday at a bus stop...

Then I started making zines about three years ago. I read a lot of zines, both in plain and artsy format. A lot of zinesters inspired me. The 'casual attitude' about making books just fascinated me. I think the function of books/magazines really inspired me -- to connect with the others. The readers—turned to friends who I am so connected to, yet will probably

never meet—inspire me.

After making a dozen of zines or so, I tried making artist books and they are inspired by my emotional feelings. Making books is a medium to me as an artist. The first two books I made may appear to be depressing (*BROKEN* and *folding memories*) but they helped lighten myself up when I was depressed.

The stories on my site are true stories. So are other stories that appear in my zines and books. I have always loved books—not just any books filled with info and words, but books that are different and handmade.

Last but not least, Ed Hutchins inspires me. His approach to bookmaking techniques, presentations, etc. He was the one who really opened my eyes to book art. I admire and love his talent and creations so much that I requested him to be my book master on our fourth meeting!

Lastly, I asked if Elsie had a vision for book art in Hong Kong. She said, "The last time I visited Hong Kong was 2003. From my understanding, book art is not so well known over there, but if Hong Kong artists make books, I think it would be a lovely thing, and I will expect to see a great deal of interesting creations too."

Where are those interesting creations? Probing further into the web I located **Tsang Kin-wah** (www.tsangkinwah.com), born in mainland China, who moved to Hong Kong in 1982. I saw that Kin-wah had a Master's degree from Camberwell College of Arts in London from 2003. I wrote to Kin-wah and found that he had first made books during his undergraduate study in Hong Kong. He had initially planned to apply in fine arts at St. Martin and Chelsea, but the professor from St. Martin who looked at his work suggested the book arts course. His interest in books began in primary school, where he practiced Chinese calligraphy in a traditionally bound book.

I think maybe because I was dealing with these books for quite a long time and have some kind of obsession with them that I started to make books and play with the book form. Even today, I still think that a book in the classic Chinese binding style is one of the most elegant objects.

I didn't make books for several years, I mean artist's books. But I made and bound my portfolio/catalogues regularly. I would not call myself a book artist since book is just one of the media that I used to express my ideas or thoughts. I don't make books regularly and I would just make book when I think it's most suitable way to present my ideas.



Elsie Sampson's *PLAY...with a sheet of paper*, 2007

I like the work *Book from the Sky* by Xu Bing since I think it's quite different with what I've seen in the past that he started from the book but expanded it quite a lot and made it to an installation dealing with the deconstruction of character, the text, Chinese culture, etc.

I don't specifically look for artists' books exhibits. In fact, I thought I had seen too much when I was studying book arts in London. ...At first, I thought the course may contain some other elements or discuss some things about the scene of contemporary arts or theory but in the end, they just talked things related to book arts or book, so it made me feel a bit disappointed.

In my point of view, different media of art are merging together nowadays and we couldn't just study one thing without knowing other things. That's why I would rather like to see some different things in order to broaden my views. I appreciate that artists who work on bookmaking and book arts since they really put their passion on it but seems that my heart is not just there. ...I guess these are the reasons why I like to see something different and continue to make installations rather than making books regularly.

Kin-wah is clearly interested in more than just the book form including language, perception, and the merging of word and image; an installation piece on his website "Interior" shows walls that are hand screenprinted with a floral pattern; only when you come closer do you see text, and that text is of and about foul language.

Although he does not actively seek out book artists, he knows

...some artists who use the book as a main element in their works are CHOI Yan-chi, SO Yan-kei. Comic artist, Chihoi, also loves to make and bind books...sometimes, Chihoi and I would teach bookmaking at YMCA.

I asked where students should go to make art when they return to Hong Kong, and if there were any art centers or good places where artists congregate.

I have no idea where they should go to make art but if they want to make art, they can do it wherever they want. Some artists like to rent a place in industrial buildings to make art while some, like me, like to work and make art at home. In recent years, many young artists set up their studios in some industrial buildings in Fotan, Kwun Tong and Chai Wan, so if students return to Hong Kong and like to find a good

place where artists congregate, they can try these places.

TAIWAN

Internet research into the art of Taiwan yielded very little. Taiwan was occupied by Japan from 1895-1945, then had a strict, traditional Chinese government which still continues, although martial law and censorship were lifted in 1987. Despite the changes, several places devoted to art exist in Taiwan today. Lung Men Art Gallery is the oldest contemporary gallery in Taiwan, founded in 1975. The Taipei National University of the Arts (www.tnua.edu.tw/) in Guandu was founded in 1982. The main museum is the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (www.ntua.edu.tw/eng/); it has fine arts classes and a variety of exhibits from traditional to avant-garde to works by Chinese liv-



From Tsang Kin-wah's website installation, *Interiors*

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ing abroad. Taipei also holds the Su Ho Memorial Paper Museum; the site (www.sinica.edu.tw/tit/museums/o496_LivelyNewMuseum.html) says, "It's a rare opportunity to practice a clean, useful craft that originated nearly 2,000 years ago. Once your paper is pressed and dried, you may feel that you have found your calling. If so, the museum also arranges classes in the art."

So there are places that sell art, collect art, and teach art in Taiwan. What does this art look like? Eleanor Heartney's 1994 article (findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_n2_v82/ai_15011515) points out the confusion surrounding what might even be "authentic" Taiwanese art, given the previous and continuing influence of Japan, China, and the West. My feeling is that historical events and cultural backgrounds can inform and influence contemporary work, but are best suited as starting points, and references, rather than as defining labels. More importantly, how is the book, book as art, or art itself seen in Taiwan now?

Although I was unable to contact any book artists currently living in Taiwan, I reached Peng-Peng Wang, through PCBA member Debbie Kogan, and Shu-Ju Wang, referred to me by Ed Hutchins, book artist and teacher in New York.

Peng-Peng (www.pengpengwang.com) is a conservator and book artist living in the SF Bay Area. She came to the United States in 1993 with an interest in Chinese book history and the desire to become a conservator through the museum studies program at San Francisco State University. She thought she ought to know how the books were put together before she learned how to restore them so she took a class from Mary Laird and, "Immediately, I fell in love with it." She has made many books and much textile art since then. I asked her if she also wrote and how she decides what language to use.



Peng-Peng Wang's *Practical Chinese for Beginners*

I won't say I write. My recent book is called *Practical Chinese for Beginners* which is a book designed for people who cannot read Chinese. I find it very challenging to introduce my own language in the works whose audience are usually Westerners. This book is my first attempt to do that. I finally started learning how to type Chinese on computer early last year and I was fascinated with my own language. The experience inspired me doing the book. However, the final result is more about communication than language itself.

I feel like I am a slave of words but, ironically, I am very attracted to book arts which will incorporate text a lot of time. In my country, artists are those who received formal (academic) training and seriously commit their lives to art-making. Therefore, I was very shy identifying myself as an artist since I have none of that training. However, I have stayed in CA long enough to feel OK telling people I am an artist and I make artist books. I also work on textile, and very often, my artist friend will remind me of how much my textile work has the influence of books. I was not aware of that.

Xu Bing, from China, inspires my bookwork. Language is a very significant part of Xu Bing's work. His brilliant concepts are always impeccably presented. He has solid understanding of his own culture and successfully translates that into his works reflecting life in a modern society. His *Book from the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy* are my favorites.

Shu-Ju Wang (www.fingerstothethebone.com) also originally from Taiwan, came here at age fifteen in the mid-1970s. She saw Xu Bing's 1990 work *Ghosts Pounding On the Wall* in Eugene, Oregon, and attended his lecture at the University of Oregon. (The installation consists of 29 rubbings of a section of the Great Wall taken by means of a traditional Chinese ink-rubbing technique.) In response to the development of book arts in the U.S. she wrote, "I wouldn't be making books now if I hadn't seen what has been happening, all the possibilities." Her silkscreened and gocco-printed book, *Nigrum* is dedicated to "piper nigrum" or black pepper and, "Initially inspired by a chili eating contest at a Thai restaurant, the book evolved to explore the history of the spice trade in SE Asia." Shu-Ju considers herself simply an artist and incorporates words into her paintings as well as her books.

Originally, I didn't see it [book art] as a separate art form (which I do now), but more as a carrier for my photography and painting; and that was how I got started, to put a group of photographs

or paintings together. But once I started taking classes, I saw the possibilities. I ended up choosing books over photography.

[In Taiwan today]...There are now community colleges and other community centers that offer classes of all sorts; I don't believe these existed in the 70's. My mother and sister both take classes all the time, in painting and fiber arts, although neither has taken up book arts. My assumption from that is that classes in book arts are not offered with any regularity.

...I tried to set up a class (for Print Gocco) this last time I visited (Fall 2005), but it didn't happen. I've also considered putting together a small exhibit there of some US artists. It seems to me that it's something that will capture people's imagination, as books are a big deal culturally. And certainly when I was growing up, that paper and printing technology were invented by the Chinese was a source of pride. Now, things might be different....

The National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts has an on-line listing of contemporary art and artists in Taiwan (cat.ntmofa.gov.tw/english/author/home001.asp?t=2), which offered a few glimpses of word and image used concurrently in an art work, if not a book itself. In "Being there-market II" created in 2004, Sheu Jer-Yu has set up objects, then projected dictionary definitions onto the objects, then photographed the result. In his description he writes "...do the words in the definition replace the image, or do the words actually become the image?" Although the word is an image in Chinese, in fact, the words he chose to project are in English. It appears that the concept of language and perception are more important than the actual letterforms themselves, and any language would actually function just as easily for this photograph. Communication and perception seem to be concepts that reach across many cultures and are not confined to the book form.

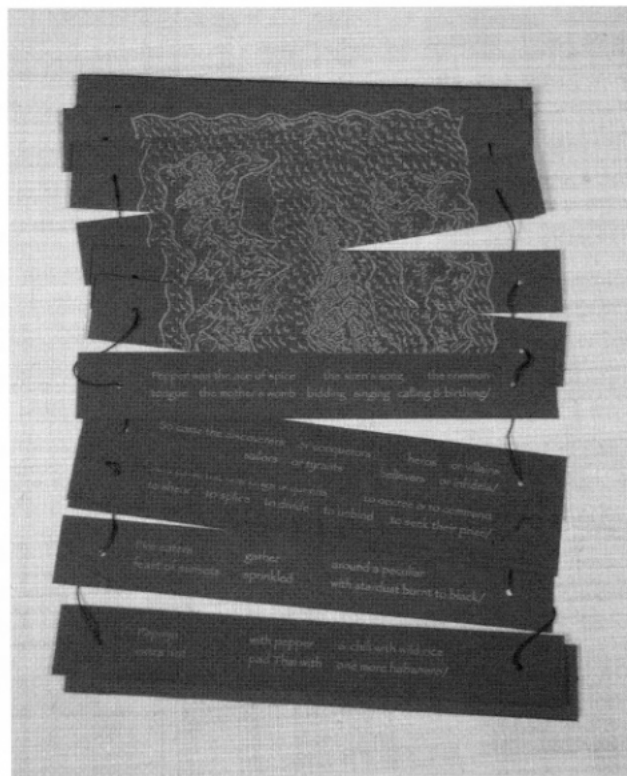
JAPAN

What does contemporary book art in Japan look like? Was it brought there or did it evolve from the Japanese culture? A paragraph in the brochure for the Japanese show, "Ehon," could also be used to describe Western book art.

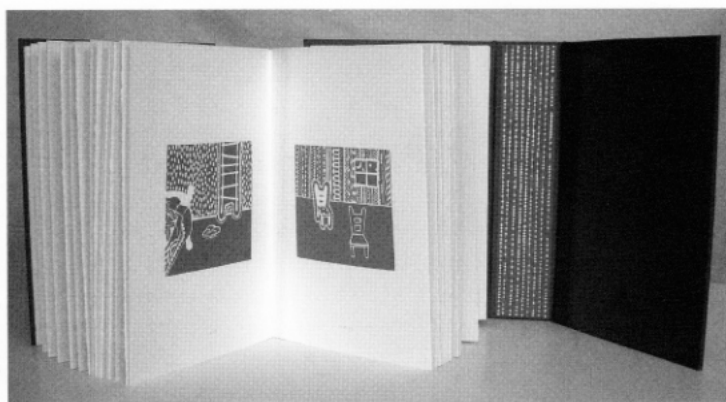
...*Ehon* are lovely to hold because they are made with sensuous, attractive, tactile materials. They are lovely to read because of the intimate play between their words and pictures and because the artists who made them were accomplished, skillful, and intelligent. They are full of hidden pleasures, sudden surprises, and growing satisfactions.

The three artists living in Japan that I contacted—**Mikae Hara**, **Kahoru Otani** (slicedbreadstudios.net/KahoruOtani.html), and **Veronika Schäpers** (www.booklyn.org/artists.php)—all originally studied elsewhere, but each had a different opinion about what was happening in Japan. I also emailed **Seiko Tachibana** (www.artnet.com/artist/78218/seiko-tachibana.html), who came to the US in 1994. I also contacted **Kahoru Otani**. Her book shown below is a book of prayer, made in 2006, in memory of her brother-in-law; she made small linocut prints almost daily for two months, and then made them into a book for herself and for her family. Here is Kahoru's response to Diane:

OK, last but not least, about the book art in Japan. It is like credit cards and computers, but I think we



Shu-Ju Wang's *Nigrum*



Kahoru Otani's book of prayer, made in 2006

have to admit that we are very behind in that field, too. ... Some people don't like the 'crafty' aspect of it, but our culture has been about craft for a long time!! We have so many beautiful crafts in our history and they have been close to us ... I think most Japanese people would like the process of making books, too. But there are not many book art shows in Japan. If any, they are small. Not to mention book art supplies, it was even hard for me to find books on book art!! But it is getting better now.

She mentioned the Tokyo Bookbinding Club and The Urawa Art Museum as possible sources of book art information. The Urawa Museum website (www.uam.urawa.saitama.jp/english.htm) features this tantalizing description, but no further details.

Art of Books: The museum collects fascinating works of art relating to books, such as books created by artists and works of art with a book theme. Books are familiar to everyone and have depth and width. The world of "art of books" is introduced here. It is our aim to make this art museum worthy of Urawa's educational and cultural reputation.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to shake up a response from the curators. The only show listed was in 2004-05 called "Eikyu/Books and Art" which featured experimental works by Eikyu, a "leader in Japanese modern art" and "illustrated books from the 17-18th centuries, magazines from the late 19th century, avant-garde books from the 20th century, and various other books. ..." No images were shown of the "avant-garde books," so it is hard to know what is considered as such.

I looked at the Tokyo Bookbinding Club site (book-binding.jp/c/en.html), which showed fine bindings: high craft, more traditional or conventional structures, tooled leather, definitely Western influenced. I also found some references that I liked:

Unbound books were referred to as "sleeping books."

Bound books: "dressing books."

I continued my query of book art activity in Japan by asking artists who make books what classes or exhibits they are finding. **Mikae Hara**, former student of Betsy Davids and Charles Gill (California College of the Arts, formerly CCAC) who currently teaches at Osaka University wrote: "I'm teaching bookmaking in my printmaking class. (I have two exchange students from CCA.) I always tell my students and myself that bookmaking is one way to show our works."

Seiko Tachibana, former student of Charles Hobson (San Francisco Art Institute) and letterpress student of mine, has been in the United States since 1994, but has maintained a working connection with Japan. Her work *A Letter in the Wind*, from 2006, illustrates that connection. Of Charles' class at SFAI she says, "I immediately got into it. It was very inspiring, maybe because I was doing a little bit of something like that in Japan. Also, book art here excited me more." On the other hand, she identifies as an artist, not as a book artist, saying, "I feel I am simply an artist. Book art sometimes gives me more freedom for my expression. I guess because of the form, also words."

Languages are still my big interest. Since now I am studying French and Italian, I am interested in it even more. Wordplay is always my favorite thing to do, even in Japanese. Images are also important for me, but for bookmaking, I guess the words come first.

I curated exchange book show between Japan and Bay Area a while ago. It was artists from Kala institute in Berkeley, California, and Kansai Area in Japan. We had a show at a gallery in Kobe and here at Kala. I saw some very interesting books. The society has not developed the field strongly yet, so I always feel like I should teach and introduce more book arts from the world.

On the web I found a reference to book art by Ryoko Adachi at the Pola Museum Annex in 2006. A book with



Left, Seiko Tachibana's *A Letter in the Wind*, 2006. Right, Veronika Schäpers' *Jack and Betty Forever*, 2005

KOREA

a German title by Ms. Adachi was also listed on a site of a collection of artist's books and zines of redfoxxpress.com. Her books are mostly bound traditionally, with book cloth covering boards; the pages are primarily visual, with inkjet prints; her German training is apparent. One book, *Walking on Alleys in the Sky* won a prize in the Seoul First International Book Arts Competition.

Veronika Schäpers, who is represented by Marshall Weber at Booklyn, is a German-born artist who currently lives and makes books in Japan. She trained as a bookbinder and studied binding, drawing, and typography in Germany before moving to Japan in 1998. "There are very few book artists in Japan and there is almost no market for 'expensive' books. I sell mainly overseas and the only collections who purchase are Urawa and Musashino Art University." According to Veronika, the young people are interested in book arts and "some centers teach, like the Bigakko in Jimbocho, Tokyo. But it is more concentrated on Design and Typography than on bookbinding." Her own books are finely crafted and use a mixture of European and Japanese materials and processes, like bamboo strips, Japanese notebooks, letterpress printing from plates, calligraphy, interesting structures, and shaped pages. She merges all three languages and cultures: English, German, and Japanese. *Jack and Betty Forever*, made in 2005, contains all three; it is both a fictional story by Shimizu Yoshinori based on an old textbook used in the 1950s and 60s to teach English to Japanese students, and a CD of recordings from the old book.

So far, it appears that the independent bookmakers in Japan have studied abroad. My sample, however, is admittedly small, and includes no traditional Japanese bookbinding/calligraphy as sources for contemporary work. Based on the "Ehon" exhibition catalogue, masters of the art of the book still exist in Japan today. It is easier to find contemporary work in the design field: Seiko mentioned work by Katsumi Komagata, an award-winning designer who spent five years in New York. He developed "tactile books" for visually impaired people, and many books for children, initially inspired by his baby daughter.

It is possible that in Japan the field we would call *book art* is actually a parallel to the Western notion of the artist's book. Some will welcome the meeting between the cultures, some will want to preserve an ideal rooted in tradition, either the thousand-year-old Japanese form or the decades-old contemporary Western model. We still have divisions within the book art field in the United States; and maybe that's fine, maybe it is better to have different experiences. In any case, it is healthier to keep the connections and conversation open, keep traveling, and keep teaching.

The man with the knowledge about Korea is Keith Smith, whose book *Structure of the Visual Book* was translated into Korean in 2004, and whose English version reproduces work by seven Korean artists. Keith gave me the name of Narae Kim, "the power force behind the blossoming book field in Korea." Neither my Korean students at SFAI in 2006 nor Heejung Kim, an artist who makes books who came here in 1989, had any idea that book arts even existed there. In fact, Keith gave an opening talk at the Seoul International Book Fair in June 2005, and returned to the Seongnam Book Art Fair in Korea in April 2007. He also collaborated with Myoung Soo Kim on a book *Tub on Tuesday*.

I sent questions to **Narae Kim** (www.bookarts.pe.kr) via email, who then wrote out her answers and had Sangmi Chun (a.k.a. Summer) translate them for me. Because Narae had the most detailed information, I'm including most of the interview here.

Education: Is there a center, school, or series of classes or workshops for students on bookmaking? Or, where should someone look?

First of all, there is the Book Arts Course through the Extension school at Yonsei University. This school provides one year of book arts course and there are about 30 participants taking the course once a week. The course provides writing, drawing, exhibition planning, and design to reflect each student's book arts courses. The course also tries to help each student to have some knowledge of book arts so they can gain teaching ability."

There are also cultural centers, art centers and private studios provide book arts course in Korea. Also, there is 30 hours of a book arts training course for elementary school teachers during their vacation time. Most of cultural centers are in Seoul. In addition to Yonsei University there are: Kids Kid in Yangjae Dong, Bookpress, Jinjoo International Education Center, Paper Cultural Center, etc..

History: Has the long tradition and history of books played a significant role in the development of the book as an art medium?

Korea has 5000 years of history. There were many manuscripts in Joseon Dynasty even though there were also woodblock print and metal types. People kept a record of all the events that were happened in the palace in a book. The book was written with all the details about what the event looked like, how much they had spent, who had visited, and lists of foods.

After Korea was opened to Western civilization by the Japanese Government in 1876, publishers start-

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ed to appear. The first publisher in modern Korea, Kwang-in-sa, had opened during this period. Kwang-in-sa inherited traditional Korean binding to publish its first publication.

I introduce book arts as one of the art genre. There are many book artists who are self taught, and also there are woodblock artists who create a simple folding book to present their works. Also, children's art has adopted book arts.

Art Form: When did using the book as an expressionistic art form begin in contemporary Korea?

Book arts were introduced in Korea after I graduated from Camberwell College of Arts in London by me. When I started my first classes at the cultural center, there were only three students and they had doubts why they need to bind a note[book] when they can buy easily. ..80% of book artists are women. I assume that they don't think book arts as a job yet.

Conference: I heard there will be a Seongnam Book Art Fair in April 2007—what types of artists will be represented? what kind of work?

Keith Smith, Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord, David Carter (still in progress of contacting), Dianne Fogwell are participating at the exhibition in Seongnam, Korea, and there are seminars, workshops, and sales.

Language: Are the books all in Korean, other languages,

or combinations of languages? Are some just compiled of visual images?

Amateur artists consider about this most of the time. They wonder if they need to use English when they participate in fairs in foreign countries. However, I think it doesn't really matter what language you are using because I think text in book arts is a part of the work. I think language is also part of the image.

Personal history: How did you get involved in making books?

I majored in Korean painting in Korea and worked as a reporter at Art Magazine for a year. Then I went to London, England in 1995. I got to know about book arts by chance. I really wanted to find a new genre in art., so I went to a library for six months to do research. I met Keith Smith's book Structure of the Visual Book, which was published in 1985, in England; It inspired me to start book art. I wanted to find something new which I could contribute to, and it was book arts. At Camberwell College (1995-1998) I studied with professor Rex first, however, Susan Johanknecht started to teach at Camberwell at the end of the semester. When she showed us her works, she and I were very surprised because we used materials that were very similar, and style of our works were also very similar. She also encouraged me to start book art. I always visit her when the book fair opens in London and we keep in touch. This coming spring, she also suggested to do collaboration work at London National Library. I also studied letterpress at Camberwell, I learned from the technician. There were many technicians at each classroom, however, many of them retired. I also took the 18th Century Leather book course for a year.

I usually get inspired by traditional Korean culture. Although I studied in England, I'd really like to talk about beautiful Asian tradition and stories upon my works.

Vision: Do you have a vision for book art in Korea? What would you like to see happen there?

There are people who are studying book arts, school teachers who'd like to adopt and use book arts to their classes and who does children's book arts, and lecturers. I can see it is growing gradually and various people from many different fields are showing their interest in book arts.

I have seen some classes for children's book arts tend to sell material kit only. However, I hope book arts pass on to Korea like Europe and the states in a right way. I hope book arts theory and translated books, book arts critic, open classes for graduate school, book arts collector to be



Heejung Kim's *Karma*, 2005

formed and accomplished. Also, I hope there is an active exchange between artists through book arts fairs.

Heejung Kim was unaware that any contemporary books were being made in Korea today. I was interested in her sculptural books that Ed Hutchins brought to my attention. Heejung is adjunct professor of painting and 2-D Design at New Jersey City University. Her connection to Buddhism inspires her work. You can see the meditative aspect of repetition in her book, *Karma*, created in 2005 (see photo to left). She writes, "The process of making art is involved with repetition of the same movement. Similar to monks who meditate upon Emptiness, sitting on the same spot and facing the wall for days, months, or years, I repeat the same movement, mostly sewing, for hours and hours in order to complete my works of art..." She came to this country in 1989 to study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, got an MA in Art Education there, then came to the State University of New York at Stony Brook for her MFA. I interviewed her also by email.

I have been making handmade books since 1991 when I was pursuing my MFA degree ... I made several large sizes of a drawing (80" x 125") at that time and I didn't like the last one. So I tore the drawing and made a book format. I liked it since you cannot figure out the whole picture by looking at one page, but eventually you figure out the whole image after looking all the pages.

The book-format works don't reveal everything at once. Once the viewer gets closer to the works, and reaches out his/her hands to turn the pages, he/she will experience the intimate stories they contain. This is the way people understand the world. Everything seems ambiguous in the beginning, but the whole picture eventually becomes clear through its progression. It is my way to reach out to the world and to communicate with people through my works of art.

I asked her where bookmaking fits into her art and if she thought of herself of a book artist or simply an artist. "I consider myself as an artist. My major form of art works is handmade book, not in traditional book format but more like sculptural form. Whenever curators or writers visit my studio, I always show them my books, not my drawings or paintings."

I asked what writers, artists or works of art particularly inspired her.

When I started making books, the professors at SUNY Stony Brook mentioned Anselm Kiefer's works. I looked up his works and I really liked them. However, I don't think I was strongly influenced by

Kiefer's work, but maybe unconsciously.

Another reason I can think of is my childhood memory. My father is a music composer. I had been watching my father always wrote music scores (at that time we didn't have copy machine so he had to write each score for each instrument) and bound them. I remember that sometimes I helped him to bind the scores and I enjoyed doing it.

The third, there have been many different forms of books produced in Ancient Asia: sliced bamboo connected together as a tool to write, bound paper, and even the prayer wheel for the illiterate. Whether I noticed or not, I grew up under Asian tradition and probably this existing diversity of book formats greatly affected my making art books. My books show various forms, from traditional book-format to box shaped books, to wrapped sculpture forms using diverse materials, such as paper, wood panel, fabric, and all mixed media.

CONCLUSION

At the start of this journey I was specifically looking for book art and book artists. Consciously or not, Heejung and some of the other artists illuminated the struggle between (and bias for or against) classifying oneself as an "artist" or a "book artist." All of the people I interviewed are artists and book artists; they create original works that incorporate the book and communicate via words or images.

In Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, words are in picture form. Word *IS* image. I imagined, at one point, that this perception of word=image would be a unifying factor in Asian work. Xu Bing showed an interest in this concept in *Book from the Sky* by carving 4000 imaginary characters that appeared to be Chinese, but weren't. Michael Cheney responds to the idea of word as image by using solitary characters, if any. Tsang Kin-wah takes the idea a step further by looking at our perception of language in general. Shu-Ju Wang and many of the other artists do not work with the image/word concept at all. Heejung Kim does not use any words in any language, even though it is about communication; it is more about process and materials. Xu Bing's works are not so much about word as picture as they are about the book and perception. If anything unifies these artists it may be a heightened awareness of physical materials and traditional techniques, as well as the cultural/historical connection to the book form itself.

Labels can be a universal problem, and they often provoke divisions within and between communities and cultures. The catalogue for "Shu" suggests that Xu Bing "has been a dedicated 'book artist' since the 1980s," but

explains that perhaps for him, as well as for other artists Zhang Xiaogang, and Song Dong, that it is not so much about making an artist's book as that "...the idea of the 'book' has stayed in the center of his art experiments." Instead of making a generalization or a blanket statement about who is and who isn't a book artist, I have to ask the question "what do we gain and what do we lose by calling ourselves 'book artists' rather than just 'artists?'"

I had attempted to locate areas of book art activity in Asian countries so I would be able to tell my students what to look for when they returned to their home countries. Most of them had come here because of rigid notions of what artists can and cannot do, in this case, Japan and Korea. One told me that in Korea, where she lived, if you want to study photography then that is all you can study; you cannot study printmaking or painting also. Outside of institutions there are cultural centers, museums, and community centers where other art forms can be explored concurrently.

The notion of "book" is ingrained in these cultures; artists are only now growing: taking inspiration from the past and using it innovatively, communicating with the present and future. What I've gleaned from these artists/book artists is that it is our job, wherever we are, to keep learning from the past—not just our own personal past, but the past of all cultures—to share that knowledge with others by creating contemporary art in general, or expressive art related to books, and teaching art and craft technique classes of all kinds. We can and should continue exploring the book and broadening our methods and meanings without rigid notions of what book art can and cannot be. ☺

Alisa Golden is a roving book arts teacher and a rooted writer (most recently of Expressive Handmade Books). Her letterpress bookwork, made in Albany, California, is collected in usual and unusual places across the country.