Article

Cultural Translation and International Reception of Nam June Paik's TV Buddha and Xu Bing's Book from the Sky

Chaohua Deng

Xi'an Fanyi University, Xi' an, 710003, China
Correspondence: 18710519936@163.com

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Abstract: ***Background:*** The international circulation of East Asian contemporary art involves both the transformation of traditional cultural resources and their reinterpretation by art institutions. How these two processes interact remains underexplored. ***Purpose:*** This study compares Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* and Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* to examine mechanisms of cultural translation and their relationship to international institutional reception. ***Methods:*** Guided by Homi K. Bhabha's third space theory, the study adopts an interpretive comparative case design, integrating artwork analysis, literature review, and examination of exhibition archives, collection records, and institutional texts. The comparison addresses production contexts, cultural translation mechanisms, display configurations, and institutional interpretation. ***Results:*** In *TV Buddha*, real-time video feedback reconfigures Buddhist imagery and the relationship between the viewer and the image. *Book from the Sky* retains traditional bookmaking techniques but disrupts reading through the use of invented characters. Across different exhibition formats, both works acquire new interpretive contexts. Curatorial narratives and collection classifications further frame their meanings through media technology, cultural history, and linguistic authority, demonstrating that institutional reception is selective rather than neutral. ***Conclusion:*** Cultural translation operates at two interrelated levels: the transformation of cultural forms within artworks and their reinterpretation by institutions. Considering artwork structure, exhibition formats, and institutional discourse together clarifies how meanings change during transnational circulation. The analysis addresses institutional interpretation rather than direct audience response.

Keywords: Cultural translation; Third space; East Asian contemporary art; Institutional reception; Transnational exhibitions

1. Introduction

Globalization, developments in media technology, and the expansion of international art networks have increasingly brought East Asian contemporary art into transnational exhibitions, museum collections, and art-historical narratives. In this process, East Asian artists have selected, displaced, and reinterpreted traditional resources by negotiating relationships among cultural contexts, media mechanisms, and art institutions, enabling local cultural symbols to acquire new meanings in contemporary artistic forms. Consequently, how traditional cultural resources are transformed into the language of contemporary art, and how their transformed meanings are received and reconstructed within the international art system, have become central questions in the study of East Asian contemporary art. Di Paola (2019) discusses "visual translation" from a cross-cultural perspective, treating translation as an interpretive concept for understanding contemporary artworks and their circulation and reception. Translation in visual art encompasses transformations among texts, images, and media, as well as the decoding and reinterpretation that occur when artworks move from their contexts of production into new geographical, cultural, and institutional settings. Cultural translation must

therefore be examined not only through formal changes within artworks but also through the meanings attributed to them in exhibitions, curatorial practices, and scholarship.

Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974) and Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991) offer two cases for examining these questions comparatively. The former establishes a real-time feedback relationship among a Buddha statue, a camera, and a television monitor; the latter frustrates reading through invented Chinese characters, woodblock movable type, and the format of classical books. Both works detach recognizable traditional forms from their conventional uses, yet differ in their points of artistic departure, media structures, and routes into international art institutions (Asia Art Archive, 2009; Hölling, 2013).

Previous scholarship has addressed Paik's video experiments, Xu's text-based art, and their cultural significance, while also offering theoretical perspectives on cultural translation and the transnational circulation of Asian art (Clark, 2007; Di Paola, 2019; Ge, 2022; Zhang, 2014). Although substantial attention has been devoted to both artists, the literature examined here leaves room for further investigation of the connections among functional transformations within artworks, their specific modes of display, and institutional interpretations. Accounts centered exclusively on international exhibition histories, or summaries of the works as combinations of "Eastern tradition and Western technology," may not adequately explain why the same artwork acquires different interpretive positions across institutions.

Accordingly, this study poses three research questions. First, how do the two artworks draw on traditional cultural resources within their respective contexts of production and transform those resources' original functions? Second, how do different modes of presentation—including performance variants, production in other locations, complete installations, and displays of individual components—alter the conditions of cultural translation? Third, how do international art institutions reorganize the cultural meanings of these works through exhibition themes, collected objects, and interpretive texts?

The study applies a common comparative framework comprising four interconnected dimensions: (1) original cultural resources and contexts of production, (2) mechanisms of cultural translation, (3) transnational display and changes in the artwork's form, and (4) institutional interpretation and reception. It compares formal analysis with exhibition and collection records. Its contribution is to distinguish the reorganization of cultural functions during artistic production from subsequent institutional reinterpretation in exhibition contexts, clarify their relationship, and provide an analytical approach to the "third space" that can be examined against artwork- and institution-specific evidence. International reception here refers only to exhibition, collection, and institutional interpretation; it is not equated with responses among general audiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Translation and the Theory of the Third Space

Homi K. Bhabha is an influential scholar of postcolonial theory. In *The Location of Culture*, he distinguishes "cultural diversity" from "cultural difference." The former tends to treat cultures as established entities available for identification and comparison, whereas the latter emphasizes the production of cultural meaning within particular relations of enunciation (Bhabha, 1994). The "third space" refers to the relational domain in which meanings can be negotiated and reformulated, rather than to a physical space produced by combining elements of two cultures. In this sense, cultural translation entails the displacement and reinterpretation of prior meanings and cannot be understood as the unchanged transmission of cultural content (Bhabha, 1994).

Approaching the subject through visual culture, Di Paola (2019) situates translation at the intersection of linguistic, cultural, and intermedial transformations. This perspective broadens the scope of translation beyond verbal conversion when examining the transfer of meaning in visual art. These approaches are complementary but serve

different analytical purposes: visual translation directs attention to the movement of meaning across media and contexts, while the third space emphasizes the reformulation of meaning and the interpretive positions involved in such movement. The present study consequently distinguishes the recognizability of cultural resources from the stability of their meanings; the retention of traditional forms does not necessarily mean that cultural content has been transmitted unchanged.

Bhabha's third space theory emerged within colonial and postcolonial cultural analysis, where the negotiation of meaning is closely connected to relations of power (Bhabha, 1994). This study neither applies all of its propositions directly nor equates East Asian artists' entry into European and American art institutions with colonial experience. Instead, it selectively draws on Bhabha's discussions of cultural difference, negotiation, and reformulation. The analysis examines how meaning is produced through changes in media and institutional interpretation while attending to institutional discursive authority as expressed through exhibition selection, collection classification, and textual explanation. It does not presume relations of mimicry, domination, or resistance; such judgments must rest on evidence from specific artworks and archival materials.

A challenge in applying this theory is to operationalize the abstract concepts of "hybridity" and "negotiation" in observable relationships among materials. If every juxtaposition of traditional forms and modern media were identified as a third space, the theory would have little power to distinguish artworks. This study therefore examines three observable stages: whether an original cultural function changes, whether the mode of display rearranges relations within the work, and whether institutional texts shift the focus of interpretation. These are operational analytical dimensions proposed for this study, not fixed indicators prescribed by Bhabha's theory.

2.2 Religious Imagery and Media Practice in Research on Nam June Paik

Research on Nam June Paik focuses on video art, Fluxus, television experimentation, and relationships between technology and human beings. Jeong and Lee (2011) locate Paik's artistic practice between anti-art and institutionalized art, and between avant-garde experimentation and the art establishment. Seo (2026), approaching his career through artistic entrepreneurship, examines how Paik generated innovation by reorganizing technologies, resources, and relational networks. Studies of *TV Buddha* have largely addressed Buddhist thought, media mechanisms, and cross-cultural interpretation. From the perspectives of Orientalism and encoding–decoding, Ma (2026) suggests that the Buddha image may be encoded as exotic or othered in Western contexts, while the real-time feedback structure also alters the relationship between the observer and the observed. Although scholarship has examined the work's Buddhist references and media structure in considerable detail, it has less often connected the work's internal transformations of meaning with its subsequent presentation within international art institutions.

These studies reveal two important lines of inquiry: one concerned with the Buddha image, Zen Buddhism, and Orientalist interpretation; the other with technological experimentation, the body, and art institutions. An issue requiring further clarification is whether the Buddha is viewed merely as a marker of regional culture or participates in the artwork as a viewing position that can be replaced, performed, and mediated. Hölling's (2013) study of temporality, changeability, and identity in multimedia installations offers a methodological point of reference for tracing different realizations of an artwork. Rather than interpreting religious symbolism alone, the present study examines how relationships among the Buddha image, the artist's body, and real-time video are reconfigured across different modes of presentation.

2.3 Illegibility and Cultural Context in Research on Xu Bing

Research on *Book from the Sky* has focused on Chinese writing and imagery, textual illegibility, epistemic authority, and cultural modernity. Examining Xu Bing's art through

the interrelated dimensions of text, media, and the public, Zhang (2014) argues that *Book from the Sky* suspends the communicative function of writing and turns Chinese characters from vehicles of meaning into visual objects. Ge (2022) situates the work within the "culture fever" and broader reflections on modernity in 1980s China, interpreting the invented characters and traditional book forms as a reconfiguration of textual authority and the organization of knowledge. In an interview, Xu relates the making of *Book from the Sky* to the cultural debates of the early reform era and describes his concern with relationships among books, writing, and people (Asia Art Archive, 2009).

An important divergence in this scholarship concerns how the work's relationship to tradition should be understood: it preserves the forms and techniques of classical book production while preventing writing from fulfilling its usual representational function. Shao's (1989, p. 4) commentary records opposing judgments that the work "departed from tradition" and was "too traditional," demonstrating that early domestic debates already offered competing understandings of the relationship among tradition, conceptual art, and craftsmanship. Illegibility therefore cannot be reduced either to a rejection of tradition or to an exotic cultural spectacle designed for international audiences.

Formal interpretations of text-based art must also be linked to the actual objects presented in exhibitions and collections. For example, a complete spatial installation and a set of book components may both be identified as *Book from the Sky*, but they offer different spatial relationships and material cues. Taking early exhibitions and critical responses in China as historical reference points, this study compares how international institutions retain the work's Chinese cultural background while shifting the emphasis of discussions of writing, reading, and knowledge.

2.4 Transnational Circulation and Institutional Reception of East Asian Contemporary Art

The international circulation of East Asian contemporary art is not a one-way movement of objects from local contexts to overseas destinations; it is a process of meaning-making involving artists, curators, museums, and academic research. Clark (2007) argues that hybridity in contemporary Asian art cannot be understood apart from artists' experiences of migration, channels of circulation, and international art institutions. Artistic meaning is reorganized through relationships among artworks, artists' biographical trajectories, the structures of the art world, and sociohistorical contexts.

This line of inquiry highlights the need to distinguish between an artwork's exhibition or collection history and its subsequent interpretation. Institutional materials can document exhibition dates, the composition of objects, and curatorial positions, but they cannot directly establish how general audiences understood a work; nor can the number of exhibitions demonstrate the degree of cultural identification. Conversely, reducing every institutional interpretation to a Western misreading of the East would obscure meaningful distinctions among media, history, and culture within institutional texts.

Taken together, the literature suggests that the most productive approach is to compare different relationships across common analytical dimensions rather than attributing differences to the artists' nationalities. Research on cultural resources establishes historical reference points; media analysis identifies functional transformations; and exhibition and collection studies examine the repositioning of meaning. This comparison is confined to the selected literature and institutional records, without claiming to exhaust scholarship on the artists or the international exhibition histories of their work.

3. Research Design and Cases

3.1 Research Design and Conceptual Definitions

This study uses an interpretive, comparative two-case design, taking artworks and

their specific exhibition and collection records as units of analysis. It does not assume that Paik and Xu represent South Korea and China, respectively; rather, it draws on differences in their points of departure, media organization, and transnational practices to examine how cultural translation occurs under different conditions. The study first reconstructs historical connections within each case and then compares them across common dimensions, avoiding the treatment of national differences as predetermined conclusions.

In this study, "cultural translation" denotes the process through which traditional cultural forms undergo functional transformation within new media structures and acquire new meanings through subsequent display and interpretation. Media interventions reshape the relationships of looking and reading between audiences and artworks. Analysis of the two works therefore focuses, respectively, on real-time video feedback involving the Buddha statue and the obstruction of reading through invented Chinese characters. "International reception" is additionally limited to two levels: transnational exhibition and institutional interpretation. The former concerns exhibitions, collections, and specific modes of presentation; the latter examines how exhibition texts and collection descriptions select historical associations and interpretive emphases. The analysis does not infer actual responses among general audiences or overall communication effects. General media reports are not, in principle, used as evidence of reception effects; reports that contain interviews with named curators are used only to verify specific curatorial perspectives.

Because this study does not center on the channels or effects of artistic communication, it does not adopt a cross-cultural communication framework primarily concerned with transmission processes. Nor does it take recipients' horizons of expectation and their changes as its principal subject; reception aesthetics is therefore not adopted as the main theoretical foundation. Instead, the analysis investigates how traditional cultural forms change function in installation media and how artworks are reinterpreted after entering art institutions. Bhabha's (1994) discussion of cultural difference and the negotiation of meaning provides a useful perspective for examining changes in the meanings of cultural forms across contexts and is therefore the study's principal theoretical approach.

3.2 Case Selection and Objects of Analysis

TV Buddha and *Book from the Sky* (as shown in Figure 1 and 2) were selected for three reasons. First, both retain culturally recognizable traditional forms while altering their conventional functions, creating a common basis for comparison. Second, they organize looking and reading through real-time video and illegible text, respectively, allowing the underlying mechanisms to be contrasted. Third, available records document different periods, institutions, and modes of presentation, enabling connections between formal analysis and institutional interpretation to be examined. Access to materials was one consideration in case selection; the works are therefore not treated as statistically representative of East Asian contemporary art.

The objects of analysis for *TV Buddha* include the installation comprising the Buddha statue and closed-circuit video, together with documented performance variants and remote real-time video presentations; the versions appearing in different records are distinguished. For *Book from the Sky*, they include the installation of books, suspended scrolls, and wall-mounted text panels, as well as book-and-wooden-box components in collections. The overall production dates of artworks are recorded separately from the dates of individual collected objects. Thus, the work's 1987–1991 production period is not substituted for the 1989 date of the M+ collection object, and a 2004 photograph of *TV Buddha* is not misidentified as documentation of the original 1974 presentation (M+, n.d.; Walsh, 2018).

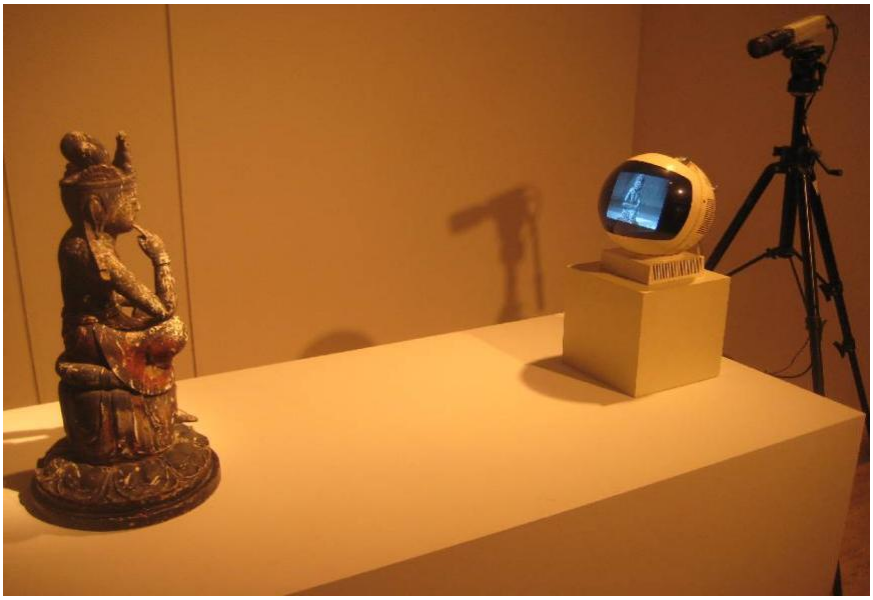

Figure 1. Nam June Paik's TV Buddha, 2004 version
Note. The work was first created in 1974.
Source. Walsh (2018), The Harvard Gazette.

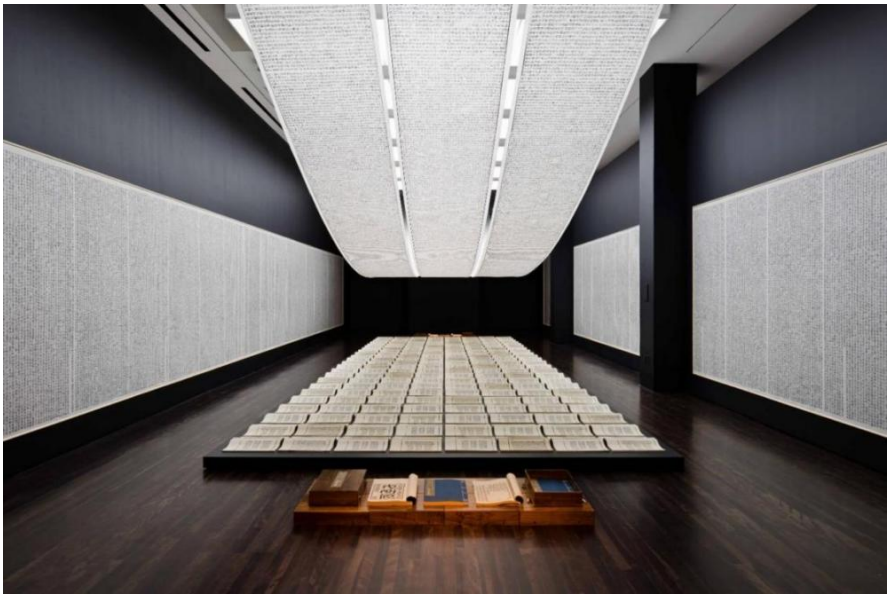

Figure 2. Xu Bing's Book from the Sky (1987–1991), installation view at the Blanton Museum of Art
Source. Blanton Museum of Art (n.d.). The museum identifies the photograph as a 2016 installation view. Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.

3.3 Scope of Materials and Selection Criteria

Materials comprise theoretical and specialized studies, artist interviews and artwork descriptions, contemporary criticism, exhibition archives and catalogues, exhibition checklists, collection records, and institutional reports containing statements by named curators. Key events extend from the creation of *TV Buddha* in 1974 to its Shanghai presentation in 2020–2021, and from the initial Chinese exhibition of *Book from the Sky* in 1988 to its presentation at M+ in 2017–2018. A curatorial text published in 2022 was used to verify the specific format of the Shanghai presentation. Scholarship consulted extends through 2026. Supplementary source verification was completed on November 7, 2026.

Searches centered on the artists' names and the Chinese, Korean, and English titles of their works, including "Nam June Paik," "TV Buddha," "TV 부처," "Xu Bing," "天书," and "Book from the Sky." These terms were combined with subject keywords such as

"exhibition," "collection," "installation," and "cultural translation" in searches of institutional websites and publicly accessible academic resources. Materials were selected purposively for their relevance to the research questions, with the aim of establishing evidentiary links between cases rather than conducting a bibliometric analysis or estimating a literature population.

Three inclusion criteria were applied. First, the source had to identify the artwork, version, or collected object and provide traceable provenance. Second, it had to substantiate at least one comparative dimension: cultural resources, translation mechanisms, changes in display, or institutional interpretation. Third, for claims concerning event dates and artwork components, priority was given to records produced by artists, organizing institutions, or collecting institutions. Websites reproducing the same institutional text were not counted as independent additional sources of evidence, and unattributed online commentary was not used to establish art-historical facts or reception effects.

Exhibition events were selected for the differences they reveal. Records involving the artist's body, production in different locations, acquisition, complete installations, component displays, and remote transmission were retained, together with institutional materials specifying exhibition themes or interpretive texts. The two cases were not required to have equal numbers of records, but the records had to address comparable questions. M+, located in Hong Kong, China, is treated as a case of cross-regional institutional circulation and interpretation.

3.4 Analytical Procedure and Source Verification

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, artists' accounts, artwork descriptions, and historical studies were used to identify cultural resources, their conventional functions, and contexts of production, providing historical reference points for comparison. Second, formal analysis examined materials, composition, images or textual rules, and the resulting relations of looking and reading, identifying cultural translation through changes in functions and relationships of cultural forms. Third, event records were organized by date, location, institution, version or component, mode of presentation, and textual source, distinguishing initial creation from later production, acquisition, and redisplay. Fourth, the works were compared across four common dimensions to determine which existing concerns institutional interpretations maintained, foregrounded, or modified.

Verification procedures were tailored to the types of claims being made. Artwork dates and component configurations were cross-checked against collection records, exhibition checklists, and artists' materials. Exhibition dates and presentation formats were verified primarily against organizers' records and supplemented by curatorial texts. Institutional interpretations were attributed to the relevant institutions or named curators, rather than presented as evidence of audience responses. When an artwork's overall production date differed from that of a collected component, or the publication date of a text differed from the exhibition date, the objects and functions of those dates were documented separately rather than artificially reconciled.

Formal analysis, literature review, and comparative analysis thus formed a connected procedure: scholarship supplied historical grounding for formal interpretation, formal analysis explained specific mechanisms of semantic shift, and institutional materials showed how those mechanisms acquired new interpretations in exhibition contexts. The study relied on interpretive analysis conducted by a single researcher and on publicly traceable artwork and institutional materials; it involved neither audience surveys nor statistical inference.

4. Comparative Analysis of Cultural Translation Mechanisms and International Reception

This section compares the two artworks across four shared dimensions. The first two examine what changes as cultural resources enter the artworks; the latter two consider how the works are presented and interpreted after entering different institutions. In each dimension, documentary accounts, institutional statements, and the present study's interpretations are distinguished to avoid treating exhibition facts as direct evidence of reception effects.

4.1 Original Cultural Resources and Contexts of Production

Created by Nam June Paik in 1974, *TV Buddha* comprises a Buddha statue, a camera, and a television monitor. The camera films the statue in real time and transmits its image to the television screen facing it, creating the appearance of the Buddha watching its own image (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2021). Although television and closed-circuit video constitute the work's primary media, the Buddha image remains its center of visual recognition.

In *TV Buddha*, the statue is the visual center of the work. Buddhist images have traditionally been associated with worship, religious cultivation, and symbolic representations of Buddhist teachings. The statue's seated posture also provides a formal basis for the work's contemplative imagery. Paik's use of this resource was not a direct inheritance of an unchanged "Eastern tradition." He lived and worked in Korea, Japan, Germany, and the United States and encountered different interpretations of Zen Buddhism through experimental music and Fluxus practice. A report on the Harvard exhibition discusses his musical training in Japan and Germany and quotes a curator on the influence of John Cage on his artistic ideas (Walsh, 2018). Analysis of the Buddha image must therefore consider both the religious associations of Buddhist sculpture and the media experience Paik developed through transnational artistic practice.

By contrast, the cultural resources of *Book from the Sky* include the structural conventions of Chinese characters, woodblock movable type, stitch-bound books, and scroll-like display. Xu created more than 4,000 characters resembling Chinese writing according to its formal rules, using the material order of classical books to contain text that cannot be read (Blanton Museum of Art, n.d.; M+, n.d.). The work invokes not only visual forms but also the conventional functions of writing in reading, preserving knowledge, and communicating information. In a retrospective interview in 2009, Xu related the work's origins to the "culture fever" of the 1980s and his own experience of reading (Asia Art Archive, 2009). This account establishes a connection with a specific domestic historical context; however, as a retrospective recollection, it should be considered separately from exhibition records and contemporary criticism.

Both artworks use recognizable forms to establish cultural points of entry, but they differ in the prior functions they transform and in their historical starting points. *TV Buddha* places religious imagery within an already developed transnational practice of avant-garde art and electronic media. *Book from the Sky* originated in domestic debates about writing and knowledge before entering overseas institutions through subsequent circulation (Asia Art Archive, 2009; Hölling, 2013; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2021). Cultural origins cannot therefore be equated directly with an artist's nationality, nor is transnational practice merely an additional stage of dissemination after an artwork is complete.

4.2 Mechanisms of Cultural Translation and Functional Reorganization

TV Buddha forms a closed-circuit video system through the Buddha statue, camera, and television monitor. The statue faces a screen onto which the camera transmits its image in real time; within this arrangement, the statue's contemplative pose becomes one of sustained observation of its own image (Ma, 2026). Meaning unfolds through the relationship between the sculptural figure and electronic imagery, involving both a displacement of religious iconography and a transformation of viewing through

television as an artistic medium.

The 1974 performance variant in Cologne is particularly salient for understanding this mechanism. Hölling (2013) records that Paik himself occupied the Buddha's original position and sat before the television. Compared with a static sculpture, the artist's bodily intervention makes the question of "who is watching themselves" practically substitutable: the contemplative pose formerly embodied by the statue becomes a bodily action, while the relationship between religious imagery and mediated self-observation changes from a fixed arrangement to a live enactment. The present study interprets this transformation as a redistribution of the viewing position rather than merely another instance of the work's exhibition in Germany.

This variant also exposes the limitations of describing the work as a combination of "Eastern religious imagery and Western technology." The Buddha cannot serve only as a stable marker of Eastern identity: the artist's body can occupy the same feedback structure, showing that translation depends on the interrelationships among the viewing subject, camera apparatus, and immediate video image. Nevertheless, bodily intervention alone does not demonstrate that religious meaning has disappeared or that Orientalist interpretations have been overcome; such claims would require specific textual evidence and reception materials.

Book from the Sky, by contrast, transforms the function of writing by separating the formation of characters from their legibility. Invented Chinese characters, dense typesetting, and classical bookbinding together maintain formal cues that suggest "this is readable text," yet the characters convey no determinate linguistic content (Blanton Museum of Art, n.d.; M+, n.d.; Zhang, 2014). The work thus redirects the acquisition of knowledge normally promised by classical texts toward questioning the conditions that make reading possible. "Obstructed reading" is used here to analyze the artwork's structure, not to suggest that audiences from different linguistic backgrounds necessarily have identical psychological experiences.

Both works retain recognizable cultural forms while interrupting or rewriting their conventional relations. Through real-time feedback, *TV Buddha* makes the observer simultaneously the object of observation. Through forms that resemble writing, *Book from the Sky* generates expectations of reading that cannot be fulfilled according to ordinary rules. The former primarily transforms the relationship between subject and image; the latter transforms the relationship between graphic form and meaning. These mechanisms establish different conditions of meaning-making and cannot be adequately described simply as a "fusion of tradition and modernity."

4.3 Transregional Display and Changes in Artwork Configuration

The transnational exhibition of *TV Buddha* has not consisted of repeatedly transporting a single object. Records of the 1976 Australian project document a newly constructed version, while the requirement of uniqueness associated with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam's 1977 acquisition stands in tension with Paik's subsequent practice of producing multiple versions (Art Gallery of New South Wales, n.d.; Hölling, 2013). These records show that identifying the object displayed and the manner of its realization is a prerequisite for discussing the continuity of its meaning. The photograph accompanying the 2018 Harvard exhibition report is explicitly identified as a 2004 version (Walsh, 2018) and should not be used as visual evidence of the work's initial 1974 presentation.

The Shanghai presentation extends this issue further. Machan (2022) describes in a curatorial text that OCAT Shanghai collaborated with the Nam June Paik Art Center in Korea to transmit live images from that center's *TV Buddha* installation and project them at the exhibition entrance. Rather than transferring the complete arrangement of statue, camera, and monitor to Shanghai, this presentation reorganized the relationship between the installation site and the viewing site through remote transmission. The study interprets this as a change in the conditions of display: the work's real-time quality was

retained, but audiences encountered it through a networked view from another location rather than through co-presence with the installation. As shown in Table 1, the key exhibition and collection milestones of *TV Buddha* across multiple regions and decades systematically document the work's evolving presentation forms and institutional collection status.

Table 1. Exhibition and Collection Milestones for TV Buddha

Date and location	Institution or event	Documented presentation or collection information
1974, New York, United States	Bonino Gallery, Nam June Paik solo exhibition	TV Buddha was initially conceived to fill a gap in this exhibition (Hölling, 2013).
1974, Cologne, Germany	'Projekt '74'	Paik replaced the Buddha statue with himself in an alternative presentation of the work (Hölling, 2013).
1976, Adelaide and Sydney, Australia	Exhibition and performance project by Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman	The project exhibited a newly produced version of TV Buddha (Art Gallery of New South Wales, n.d.).
1977, Amsterdam, the Netherlands	Acquisition by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam	The museum initially required a unique work, although TV Buddha was subsequently realized in multiple forms (Hölling, 2013).
2018, Cambridge, United States	Harvard Art Museums, Screen Play exhibition, reported by Walsh (2018)	The photograph of TV Buddha accompanying the report is identified as the 2004 version (Walsh, 2018).
2020–2021, Shanghai, China	OCAT Shanghai, Refocusing on the Medium: The Rise of East Asia Video Art	In collaboration with the Nam June Paik Art Center, the exhibition presented a live transmission from the center's TV Buddha installation; the collection version was dated 1974 (2002) (Machan, 2022).
2021, San Francisco, United States	San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Nam June Paik retrospective	The museum identified TV Buddha as a featured work in the exhibition (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2021).

Note. The 1977 entry documents an acquisition. The 2020–2021 entry describes a remote real-time video presentation in Shanghai, based on a curatorial text published in 2022. These records do not represent the continuous movement of a single object.

The first exhibitions of *Book from the Sky* in China were intertwined with the work's development. The first completed sections were shown at the National Art Museum of China in 1988; the work appeared again in the 1989 China/Avant-Garde exhibition, although production of the complete work continued until 1991 (Asia Art Archive, 2009). The form of the later complete installation must therefore not be projected backward as if it had already been fixed in 1988. The controversy surrounding tradition and contemporary artistic ideas also preceded the work's entry into international institutions (Shao, 1989).

Among its international presentations, *Three Installations by Xu Bing* at the Elvehjem Museum of Art in 1991–1992 provides an early point of reference (Erickson, 1991). The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2013–2014 exhibition and the Blanton Museum of Art's 2016–2017 solo exhibition presented spatial installations combining books, scrolls, and wall panels (Blanton Museum of Art, n.d., 2017; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). By contrast, the checklist for the 2017–2018 M+ exhibition lists book-and-wooden-box components corresponding to collection object 2012.1150, which is dated 1989 in the collection record (M+, n.d., 2017). The complete spatial installation and the book components should therefore be treated as distinct units of observation.

Comparison shows that changes in the form of *TV Buddha* chiefly involve installation versions, bodily intervention, and video connections, whereas changes in *Book from the Sky* emphasize the contrast between a complete spatial environment and sets of book components. For the former, analysis must establish where, by whom, and using which equipment the feedback relationship was realized. For the latter, it must establish whether audiences encountered an encompassing spatial installation or identifiable book objects. Changes in presentation affect the perceptual and material cues available for interpretation; however, form alone cannot establish whether an institution intentionally

downplayed or emphasized a particular meaning. Interpretive texts must also be examined. As shown in Table 2, the early exhibitions and institutional presentations of *Book from the Sky* further demonstrate the differentiation of its display configuration across different exhibition venues and collection contexts.

Table 2. Early Exhibitions and Institutional Presentations of Book from the Sky

Date and location	Institution or event	Documented presentation or collection information
1988–1989, Beijing, China	Initial presentation at the National Art Museum of China and the China/Avant-Garde exhibition	The first completed sections were exhibited in 1988 and shown again in 1989; production of the work was still under way (Asia Art Archive, 2009).
November 1991–January 1992, Wisconsin, United States	Elvehjem Museum of Art, Three Installations by Xu Bing (Erickson, 1991)	Book from the Sky was exhibited alongside Ghosts Pounding the Wall and Five Series of Repetitions (Erickson, 1991).
December 2013–April 2014, New York, United States	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China	The museum exhibited the artist-owned complete spatial installation in its 'Written Word' section (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).
June 2016–January 2017, Texas, United States	Blanton Museum of Art, Xu Bing: Book from the Sky	In a solo exhibition dedicated to the work, the museum presented the full-scale installation of books, hanging scrolls, and wall panels (Blanton Museum of Art, 2017).
2017–2018, Hong Kong, China	M+, The Weight of Lightness: Ink Art at M+	Book and wooden-box components were shown (M+ Sigg Collection, object no. 2012.1150); the object is dated 1989, separately from the complete installation (M+, n.d., 2017).

Note. The 1988–1989 entries provide a historical reference from China; Hong Kong is treated as a site of cross-regional institutional presentation. The overall period of the work's production is distinguished from the date of a particular collected set.

4.4 Institutional Interpretation and the Negotiation of Meaning

Regarding *TV Buddha*, the Harvard exhibition report quotes curator Marina Isgro on the immediacy of real-time video and relates the Buddha's continual viewing of its own image to technologically mediated self-observation (Walsh, 2018). The curatorial text for the Shanghai project uses live images transmitted across locations to discuss presence, shifts in time and space, and connections between the local and the global (Machan, 2022). Materials for the SFMOMA retrospective explain the work's feedback structure in relation to Zen Buddhism and the relationship between art and technology (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2021). The same installation relationship thus enters different interpretive contexts: religion, subjectivity, and media history remain relevant but receive different emphases in each institution's narrative.

International institutional interpretations of *Book from the Sky* must likewise be considered in relation to its domestic concerns. The opposing evaluations recorded by Shao (1989) demonstrate that the relationship between traditional forms and contemporary concepts was already a subject of debate in China. Through its "Written Word" section, the Metropolitan Museum situated the work within the ongoing development of Chinese historical art traditions. Beyond the context of the Chinese avant-garde, the Blanton Museum further emphasized the credibility of the written word and the authority of books (Blanton Museum of Art, 2017; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). International interpretation therefore both sustains the work's original concerns about writing and reframes the scale at which those concerns are addressed through exhibition categories.

The M+ case particularly illustrates that exhibition format and textual interpretation do not correspond in a simple, predetermined way. The collection categorizes the relevant object as a print and identifies its materials as wood movable-type printing and a wooden box, while the accompanying description connects it to textual and linguistic systems and the production and circulation of knowledge in 1980s China (M+, n.d.). Although the displayed object consists of book components, the institution's description situates it

within broader historical associations. This suggests that component-based display necessarily reduces cultural meaning. Rather, the material object, its classification, and the descriptive text jointly shape this instance of institutional interpretation.

The works share the fact that institutions do not passively repeat an artist's original intention: they organize relationships among artworks through object selection, exhibition themes, and explanatory texts. They differ in that institutional accounts of *TV Buddha* focus more on the relationship between religious imagery and electronic media, while interpretations of *Book from the Sky* shift emphasis among Chinese traditions of writing, cultural history, and linguistic authority. These conclusions are limited to the institutional texts selected for this study and should not be generalized to European and American institutions or international audiences as a whole.

Invoking the third space therefore neither equates transnational exhibitions with cultural hybridity nor assumes that artists and institutions occupy equal interpretive positions. The materials examined here reveal negotiations of meaning at two interrelated stages. Artists reorganize media and form, generating new questions around traditional cultural resources. Art institutions then determine how such questions enter art-historical narratives through the choice of displayed objects, exhibition classifications, and interpretive texts. Comparing these works suggests that the international meanings of East Asian contemporary art are determined neither by cultural origin alone nor wholly by institutional attribution. Rather, they emerge through the intersection of artists' transnational practices, artworks' formal structures, and institutions' classifications of knowledge. International reception refers to the ongoing process through which these relationships become concrete and are repeatedly redefined.

Accordingly, the study employs the third space to discuss reformulations that can be identified in the available materials: artworks first change the conventional functions of cultural forms, and institutions subsequently select interpretive positions through display and classification. Artists and institutions do not exercise equal influence, and their relationship is not necessarily free of conflict. The available evidence identifies institutional interpretive choices but cannot reconstruct all curatorial negotiations or rejected alternatives. Consequently, differences between texts are not automatically interpreted as evidence of deliberate resistance or institutional domination. Table 3 summarizes the four comparative dimensions and their supporting evidence.

Table 3. Comparison of Cultural Translation and Institutional Reception

Comparative dimension	TV Buddha	Book from the Sky	Comparative assessment
Cultural resources and context	Buddha image, transnational avant-garde art, and electronic media practice (Hölling, 2013; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2021; Walsh, 2018).	Chinese characters and classical book forms in the context of cultural debates in 1980s China (Asia Art Archive, 2009; Ge, 2022).	Both retain culturally recognizable cues, but transform different prior functions and have different historical starting points.
Translation mechanism	Real-time feedback reorganizes looking; performance variants place the artist's body in the viewing position (Hölling, 2013; Ma, 2026).	The separation of recognizable graphic forms from unreadable content reorganizes reading and knowledge (Blanton Museum of Art, n.d.; Zhang, 2014).	Compare transformations of functions and relationships, rather than merely counting traditional elements.
Display and configuration	Multiple versions, production in different locations, and remotely transmitted real-time video (Art Gallery of New South Wales, n.d.; Hölling, 2013; Machan, 2022).	Complete installations and book components enter exhibitions and collections separately (Blanton Museum of Art, 2017; M+, 2017; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).	Versions, components, and modes of connection are concrete conditions for interpretation.
Institutional interpretation	Differing emphases on self-observation, Zen Buddhism, and regional video art history	Differing emphases on traditions of writing, linguistic authority, and knowledge production	Institutions select and reorganize existing questions; this does not establish

	(Machan, 2022; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2021; Walsh, 2018).	(Blanton Museum of Art, n.d.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).	audience reception effects.

Note. Compiled from the artwork analysis and sources cited in Tables 1 and 2. The comparative assessments are the interpretations advanced in this study.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Principal Findings

Comparison of *TV Buddha* and *Book from the Sky* across four common dimensions reveals three findings. First, the critical issue in cultural translation is not whether traditional symbols and new media appear together but whether the conventional functions and relationships of cultural forms have changed. *TV Buddha* reorganizes the relationship between the viewing subject and the live video image, while *Book from the Sky* reorganizes the relationships among graphic form, reading, and the meaning of knowledge. Artists' transnational experiences and domestic historical questions provide different starting points for these transformations; shared East Asian origins do not imply identical mechanisms.

Second, cross-regional display provides concrete conditions for the continuation of cultural translation. Performance variants, versions created in other locations, remote real-time presentation, and the distinction between complete installations and book components determine the objects and relationships through which a work appears in a given setting. International display must therefore be analyzed in terms of identifiable versions and components and their conditions of viewing, rather than merely in terms of exhibition locations and the number of exhibitions.

Third, institutional reception involves the selective positioning of the issues raised by artworks rather than the unchanged reception of cultural meanings. Through exhibition themes, object classifications, and interpretive texts, institutions relate artworks to media history, traditions of writing, linguistic authority, and cultural history. Cultural translation within works and institutional reinterpretation are connected but do not coincide. International meaning takes shape through their interaction, while preserving differences between historical origins and interpretive positions.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study brings the reorganization of functions during artistic production and the repositioning of meaning during display into a single comparative framework, showing that cultural translation operates both at the level of the artwork's structure and at the level of institutional discourse. The application of the third space thereby moves from a general reference to cultural mixture toward an examination of concrete relationships within artworks and shifts in interpretive positions. This represents an operational refinement based on two artworks; it does not validate the theory as a whole or replace historical research on the works.

Methodologically, the study systematically connects versions, components, exhibition categories, and institutional texts, making inferences between formal analysis and reception studies more explicit. This approach helps distinguish three levels of evidence: (a) evidence that the work was exhibited or collected, (b) evidence that an institution offered a particular interpretation, and (c) evidence that audiences actually accepted that interpretation. It therefore avoids using institutional visibility as a substitute for evidence of reception effects.

In practice, organizers of transnational exhibitions and museum curators should accurately identify artwork versions, components, and reinstallation procedures, distinguishing original presentations, later productions, and remotely transmitted video images. Interpretive texts should explain not only an artwork's cultural and historical associations but also its specific media mechanisms. For a work composed of separable

elements, such as *Book from the Sky*, displays of its book components should provide necessary information about the complete installation and the work's domestic context of production. For a variable installation such as *TV Buddha*, descriptions of versions and feedback relationships should correspond to the actual presentation. International art communication can thereby provide richer points of entry into artworks without reducing them to fixed symbols of national culture.

5.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study examines only two artworks selected purposively to represent contrasting artistic approaches. Its conclusions therefore concern the relationships investigated and cannot be generalized to East Asian contemporary art as a whole. Materials derive mainly from artists' accounts, existing scholarship, and publicly available institutional records. Retrospective interviews may be shaped by later understandings, while institutional texts express particular curatorial positions and cannot fully reveal the underlying decision-making processes. Some historical materials still require further consultation of original records to improve the reproducibility of factual details and interpretive judgments.

The study did not include surveys of general audiences, interviews with curators, or on-site observations, nor did it collect data on art markets, transaction networks, or communication platforms. Its findings therefore concern institutional reception and the conditions of interpretation; they cannot establish how audiences from different cultural backgrounds understood the works or account for changes in market value. Future research could expand the sample of artworks and institutions, combine exhibition archives with curatorial interviews and cross-cultural audience studies, and further compare audience and institutional responses to complete installations, individual components, and remote presentations, as well as examine relationships between institutional discourse and audience interpretation.

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