

Life and Death in Contemporary Chinese Art: A Study of the Works of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing

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Abstract

This study explores the theme of life and death in contemporary Chinese art, focusing on the works of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing. Drawing on the philosophical systems of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, this study critically assesses how these concepts have influenced the artists' portrayal of life and death in their major works. Through a comprehensive analysis of specific artworks, such as Cai Guo-Qiang's "Project for Extra-terrestrials No. 10: Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters" and Xu Bing's "Tobacco project" etc, the study examines the interplay of these philosophical systems and their impact on the creative process of contemporary artists, especially in relation to the portrayal of life and death themes driven by Chinese philosophical systems.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese art; Cai Guo-Qiang; Xu Bing; life and death; Chinese philosophy; Buddhism; Taoism; Confucianism

1. Introduction

Chinese art has a long and illustrious history that spans thousands of years, reflecting the rich and complex cultural heritage of the region (Chang, 2011). Among contemporary Chinese artists, Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing have emerged as prominent figures, receiving international acclaim for their inventive and thought-provoking art. Their artistic creations frequently delve into the themes of life and death, which are closely intertwined with the essence of traditional Chinese philosophical systems including Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (Yiyang, 2017).

Examining the topic of life and death in the artworks of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing is significant for understanding the ways these artists address these universal themes within the specific cultural, historical and philosophical contexts of China. This exploration is essential for comprehending their unique perspectives and contributions to the global art discourse. The study of life and death in their works is grounded in Chinese philosophical systems, which emphasizes harmony with the natural world and the cyclical nature of existence (Li, 2013). This philosophical framework allows

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for an in-depth examination of the artists' engagement with these themes and their representation in their art practices.

1.1 Research aims and objectives

The aim of this research project is to investigate the themes of life and death in the works of contemporary Chinese artists Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing, examining how these themes are often portrayed through art and how traditional Chinese cultural philosophies have influenced their artistic expression. Furthermore, this study seeks to critically reflect on how the insights gleaned from their works would influence the creative process of contemporary artists. To achieve this aim, the following objectives are fulfilled:

- To conduct a comprehensive review of literature on Chinese philosophical systems including Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, evaluating their impacts on the perception of life and death in the history of Chinese art.
- To apply formalism and semiotics in analysing the visual language and forms in Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing's artworks, focusing on their relation to Chinese cultural philosophies and the portrayal of life and death themes.
- To critically assess the impact of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing's artistic practices and the inspiration derived from their unique perspectives on life and death in the creative process of contemporary artists.

1.2 Research significance

Through the examination of how Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing portray life and death themes in their artwork, influenced by traditional Chinese cultural philosophies, this study provides valuable insights for the researcher's personal and professional artistic development. The researcher critically discusses on the key insights identified from these artists' techniques, reflecting on the influence and the new perspectives they would have on the creative process of contemporary artists. Consequently, this study presents an exciting opportunity to uncover the fascinating ways in which life and death are depicted in contemporary Chinese art and how this portrayal can be utilized to inspire and enrich one's own creative practice.

1.3 Research question

How does traditional Chinese cultural philosophical systems influence the portrayal of life and death themes in contemporary Chinese art?

1.4 Research methodology

This research study employs formalism and semiotics as the primary qualitative visual analysis methodologies to examine the works of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing, with a specific focus on their relation to Chinese cultural philosophies and the portrayal of life and death themes. Formalism emphasizes the visual and formal elements of an artwork such as colour, composition, texture and form (Feldman, 1992), while semiotics focuses on the signs, symbols, and meaning conveyed by the artwork (Jewitt & Leeuwen, 2000). The use of these approaches enables a detailed examination of the artists' unique artistic practices and the underlying cultural philosophies that inform their works. The visual analysis will be conducted through Curtin's (2009) systematic process that begins with a description of each artwork's visual elements, followed by an interpretation of its themes, symbols and the artists' use of materials and techniques. This comprehensive approach enables a thorough understanding of the life and death themes depicted in the art of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing, and how they are communicated through visual language and forms.

1.5 Structure of report

The structure of this thesis is organized into six chapters to systematically address the research objectives. The second chapter provides a comprehensive review of literature on Chinese philosophical systems, including Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, focusing on their impact on Chinese art. This chapter offers a foundational understanding of the cultural context in which the artists' works are situated and how these philosophies have influenced artistic expressions throughout Chinese history. The third and fourth chapters apply the visual analysis methods of formalism and semiotics to the artworks of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing, focusing on their relationship with Chinese cultural philosophies and the portrayal of life and death themes. These chapters delve into the artists' distinct approaches, examining their techniques, materials, and visual language in relation to the broader Chinese art discourse. The fifth chapter critically assesses the potential impact of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing's artistic practices on the creative process of contemporary artists. This chapter reflects on the inspiration derived from the artists' unique perspectives on life and death driven by Chinese philosophical systems, considering how their works would influence artistic development and the creative process of contemporary artists.

2. Life and death themes in Chinese art

Life and death themes in Chinese art have their origins in the rich and diverse philosophical systems that have shaped the region's cultural heritage (Chang, 2011). These themes have permeated various forms of artistic expression throughout Chinese history and continue to be relevant in contemporary Chinese art (Fok, 2013). The exploration of life and death themes allows artists to grapple with universal questions related to human existence and connect with the cultural, historical and philosophical context of China. According to Fok (2013), one of the reasons life and death themes are important in contemporary Chinese art is that they provide a link between the past and present, helping to maintain cultural continuity. By engaging with these themes, contemporary artists can draw upon the wisdom and knowledge of their predecessors, creating works that reflect the evolving nature of Chinese culture while remaining grounded in tradition.

Another significant aspect of Chinese art is the emphasis on the harmony between humans and the natural world, shaping the portrayal of life and death themes by underscoring the interconnectedness of all living beings and their environment (Gladston, 2014).

This is common in Chinese landscape paintings, artists depict scenes of nature to convey the cyclical nature of life and death to illustrate the delicate balance between humans and the world around them, as evidential in the famous handscroll painting “Along the river during the Qingming festival” by Song dynasty Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145) in figure 1 (CO Museum, 2023). The painting captures a lively and bustling scene of daily life in the capital city of Bianjing during the Qingming Festival, a traditional Chinese event for honouring the deceased and celebrating the arrival of spring. This artwork offers a rich tapestry of life, providing an opportunity to explore the intricate connections between life and death in Chinese culture. The bustling marketplaces, shops, and people from all walks of life offer a glimpse into the thriving urban society of the Song Dynasty. By illustrating the vibrancy and continuity of life, Zhang Zeduan invites viewers to reflect on the cyclical nature of existence and the interconnectedness of life and death, highlighting the importance long origins of life and death themes in Chinese art.

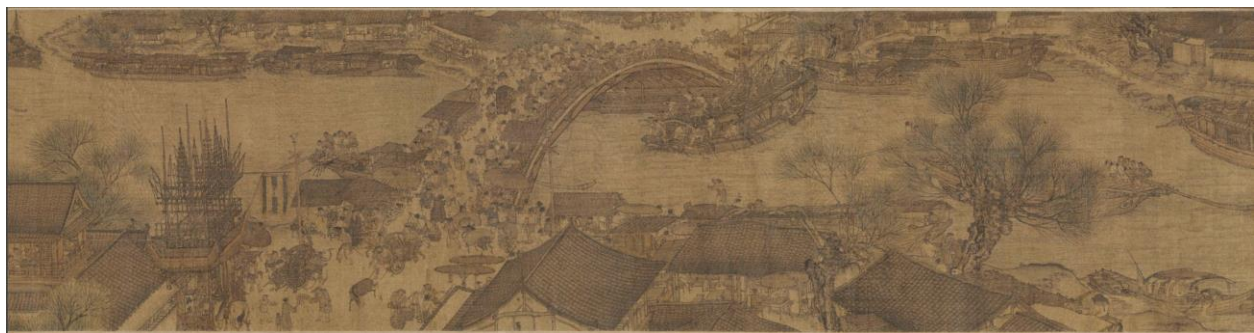


Figure 1: Along the river during the Qingming festival (CO Museum, 2023)

2.1 Buddhism influence on the perception of life and death in Chinese art

Chinese Buddhism has significantly influenced the perception of life and death in Chinese art over the centuries, as its core beliefs, such as karma, samsara and enlightenment, have profoundly shaped artistic expressions and themes (Zhang, 2019). Karma, the law of cause and effect, highlights the interconnectedness of actions and consequences, inspiring Chinese artists to represent the karmic cycle visually. For instance, the cave paintings of the Dunhuang Magao caves depict the Jataka tales, illustrating the consequences of the Buddha's virtuous actions as illustrated in figure 2 (Dunhuang Foundation, 2021). Samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, is another key concept that has impacted the portrayal of life and death in Chinese art. This is illustrated in the wheel of life paintings, found in many Chinese Buddhist temples, depicting the six realms of existence and highlighting the interconnectedness of life and death and the impermanence of life as shown in figure 3 (Schmid, 2008).



Figure 2: Karmic cycle transformation (Mogao Cave 172, Dunhuang Foundation, 2021)



Figure 3: Wheel of life. Eastern Tibet, 18th century (Schmid, 2008, p295)

Enlightenment, the ultimate goal in Buddhism, represents the attainment of spiritual awakening and liberation from the cycle of samsara (Kucera, 2016). Buddhist art often portrays the Buddha and other enlightened beings, such as bodhisattvas, as a reminder of the potential for spiritual transcendence beyond the boundaries of life and death (Lamirin et al, 2021). As illustrated in figure 4, the numerous Buddha statues in the Longmen Grottoes embody this concept, representing the possibility of overcoming the cycle of birth and death through spiritual practice (Kaihao, 2022). Chinese Buddhist art has also drawn inspiration from the concept of “Pure Land”, a heavenly realm where beings can be reborn and continue their journey towards enlightenment (Chandler, 2004). Many of the Chinese artworks including the aforementioned examples depict the Pure Land as a paradisiacal realm, symbolizing an idealized state beyond the suffering of the human world, demonstrating the enduring impact of Buddhist thought on Chinese art and culture.



Figure 4: Cycle of birth and death, Longmen Grottoes (Kaihao, 2022)

2.2 Taoism influence on the perception of life and death in Chinese art

Taoism is another significant Chinese philosophical system that has greatly impacted the perception of life and death in Chinese art. Central to Taoism is the concept of the Tao, an underlying principle governing the natural world and the harmonious flow of life (Little et al, 2000). The notion of harmony and balance is essential in Taoism, emphasizing the interdependence of life and death as complementary aspects of the cosmic order under the yin-yang symbol (Levitt, 1999), Yin Yang is a visual representation of duality, being widely adopted in Chinese art to symbolize the interconnectedness and balance of life and death (Levitt, 1999). Taoist art also reflects the pursuit of longevity and immortality, as Taoist practitioners aim to transcend the limitations of mortal life. This pursuit is often manifested in art through the depiction of immortals, such as the Eight Immortals or Xian, who represent spiritual attainment and the ability to overcome life's impermanence as shown in figure 5 (VOC, 2021).



Figure 5: Painting of the Eight Immortals at Baxian An, Shanxxi (VOC, 2021)

Additionally, Chinese landscape paintings have also been heavily influenced by Taoist thought, often incorporate images of mountains and rivers as symbols of nature's eternal essence (McMahon, 2003). According to Little et al (2000) the incorporation of landscapes in Chinese art not only embody the harmony between life and death but also serve as a metaphor for the human spiritual journey. The five elements philosophy is another key aspect of Taoism that further influences the representation of life and death in Chinese art. The Five Elements—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water are believed to govern the cycles of creation and destruction in the natural world, reflecting the constant flux of life and death (Chang, 2011). Chinese artists have often utilized these elements in their compositions, illustrating the interplay of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth. The famous painting "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" by Huang Gongwang as shown in figure 6 captures the essence of the five elements in its depiction of a harmonious, ever-changing natural environment (Co Museum, 2019). This painting portrays the five elements through displays of mountains (earth), trees (wood), river (water), inferring fire and metal through rough textures and dark tones (Jaguscik, 2019). Through these artistic expressions, Taoism's profound influence on the perception of life and death in Chinese art becomes evident.



Figure 6: Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains (Co Museum, 2019)

2.3 Confucianism influence on the perception of life and death in Chinese art

Confucianism is one of the most important philosophical systems throughout the ancient history of China, founded by Confucius, Confucianism has played a vital role in shaping the perception of life and death in Chinese art. Central to Confucianism is the cultivation of moral character and the maintenance of social order, emphasizing the importance of filial piety, respect for authority and adherence to rituals (Qian, 2003). This is illustrated in the collection of stories in the “Twenty-four filial exemplars” paintings that holds significant importance in illustrating the influence of Confucianism on the perception of life and death in Chinese art as shown in figure 7. The portrayal of life and death in these paintings demonstrates the Confucian belief in the continuity of life and the cyclical nature of existence. They emphasize the importance of honouring one's ancestors and carrying on their virtues and values, as well as the interdependence of generations. The cycle of life, death, and rebirth is an essential theme in these artworks, showcasing how Confucianism promotes the belief that our actions in life have consequences beyond our own existence.

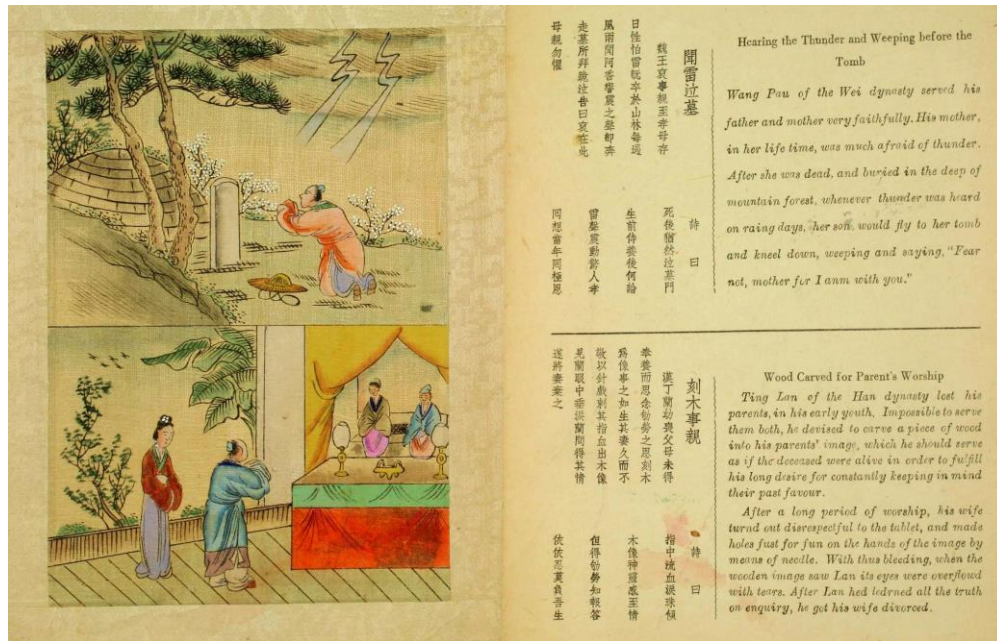


Figure 7: Hearing the thunder and weeping before the tomb – Twenty-four filial exemplars English version (Yac, 2017)

Furthermore, Confucianism's emphasis on proper conduct and ritual has also shaped the representation of life and death in Chinese art. For instance, Confucian thought encourages the practice of funerary rites and the creation of elaborate tombs to honour the deceased and ensure a smooth transition to the afterlife (Zhuo, 2019). The Han dynasty's "Wu Family Shrines" provides a prime example of this (figure 8, Minneapolis Institutes of Art, 2017), with its intricately carved stone reliefs illustrating scenes from the Confucian classics and depicting the virtues and moral values that the deceased embodied during their lifetime. The Confucianism philosophy encourages artists to depict the cyclical nature of existence, highlighting the interdependence of generations and the importance of maintaining harmonious connections between the living and the dead (Williams, 2012). Through these artistic expressions, Confucianism's impact on the perception of life and death in Chinese art becomes evident.



Figure 8: Wu Family Shrine (Minneapolis Institutes of Art, 2017)

2.4 Interplay of philosophical systems in Chinese art

The influence of Chinese philosophical systems, including Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, on the portrayal of life and death themes in Chinese art is vital for understanding the development and origins of contemporary Chinese art. The interplay of these philosophies within art often results in rich and complex expressions, as artists integrate various perspectives to offer unique insights into the human experience. The review performed in this chapter illustrates the significance of these systems in shaping the themes of life and death, providing important understanding on their relevance to contemporary Chinese art. In the upcoming chapter, the impact of philosophical systems on the portrayal of life and death themes in the works of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing is explored. By examining the complex relationships between these Chinese philosophical systems and the themes of life and death in their artworks, a deeper comprehension of the cultural context and creative processes guiding contemporary Chinese artists is obtained, which can be applied to reflect contemporary artistic endeavours.

3. Overview of Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou, Fujian Province and is an internationally acclaimed Chinese artist known for his innovative and diverse artistic practice. Upon studying stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy and later moved to Japan, where he experimented with gunpowder as an artistic medium. Eventually, he settled in New York, where his career as a contemporary artist gained global recognition. Cai Guo-Qiang's work often delves into themes of life and death, reflecting influences from Chinese philosophical systems such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. This chapter aims to explore Cai Guo-Qiang's major works focusing on life and death themes and their connections to Chinese philosophical systems.

3.1 Project for Extra-terrestrials No.10: Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000m

"Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10: Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters" is a 1993 installation and performance piece by Cai Guo-Qiang (Rojas, 2010). The project involved igniting a 10,000-meter-long gunpowder fuse that extended from the end of the Great Wall of China, creating a temporary extension visible from space as depicted in figure 9 (P3, 1993). This ambitious project showcases Cai's innovative use of materials and reflects on the themes of life and death, as well as the influence of Chinese philosophical systems. The Great Wall of China is emblematic of national unity and strength, and by extending it, Cai engages with Confucian values of social harmony and collective responsibility. The temporary nature of the extension also emphasizes the impermanence of human constructs, alluding to Buddhist ideas about the fleeting nature of existence. The gunpowder fuse's burning and disappearance serve as a metaphor for the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death (Walker, 2019).



Figure 9: Project to extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000m (P3, 1993)

Additionally, the project can be interpreted as a reflection of Taoist principles, particularly the concept of balance and harmony between humanity and nature. The ephemeral quality of the gunpowder extension suggests a recognition of human achievement's limitations and the enduring power of natural forces (Walker, 2019). By acknowledging the futility of attempting to conquer nature, the project embodies a Taoist acceptance of the cyclical processes of life, death and rebirth (Levitt, 1999). Cai Guo-Qiang's "Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10" integrates life and death themes with Chinese philosophical systems such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. The innovative use of gunpowder and the symbolic extension of the Great Wall encourage viewers to contemplate the complex relationships between human existence, impermanence and nature's forces. This project demonstrates the continued influence of Chinese philosophical systems on contemporary Chinese art and their importance in providing a rich cultural context for examining life and death themes.

3.2 Head On

“Head On” is an installation by Cai Guo-Qiang created in 2006 and exhibited at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin. The work features 99 life-sized replica wolves charging headlong into a glass wall, only to fall and rise again in a seemingly endless cycle as shown in figure 10 (DT Blog, 2011). This visually striking piece conveys powerful messages about life, death and the influence of Chinese philosophical systems. The wolves' repetitive and futile actions evoke the Confucianism concept of "li" (ritual), which emphasizes the importance of social order and harmony (Qian, 2003). The wolves appear to follow an invisible order, despite the inevitable collision with the glass wall. This highlights the role of tradition and ritual in society, while simultaneously questioning the wisdom of adhering to customs that lead to suffering or self-destruction. The cyclical nature of the installation, with wolves continuously charging and falling, echoes the Buddhist notion of samsara - the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that all sentient beings experience (Zhang, 2019).



Figure 10: Head On installation at the Deutsche Guggenheim (DT Blog, 2011)

This portrayal of endless repetition and struggle serves as a reminder of the importance of spiritual growth in overcoming the cycle of suffering, as the wolves' plight represents the struggle for liberation from the repetitive cycle, emphasizing the impermanence of life, the inevitability of death and the desire for transcendence, embodying Taoist principles of balance and harmony between opposing forces. The wolves symbolize the powerful yet reckless energy of "yang," while the glass wall represents the immovable and resilient "yin." The interplay between these opposing forces illustrates the need for equilibrium in both nature and human society. This dynamic tension is also reflected in the piece's visual composition, which creates a sense of movement and energy while maintaining a delicate balance between chaos and order. By incorporating Taoist principles, Cai Guo-Qiang underscores the importance of harmony in understanding the cycle of life and death, as well as the interconnectedness of all living beings.

Furthermore, "Head On" embodies Taoist principles of balance and harmony between opposing forces. The wolves symbolize the powerful yet reckless energy of "yang," while the glass wall represents the immovable and resilient "yin." The interplay between these opposing forces illustrates the need for equilibrium in both nature and human society (Levitt, 1999). Through the integration of life and death themes with Chinese philosophical systems, Cai Guo-Qiang's "Head On" encourages viewers to consider the complex relationships between human existence, tradition, and the natural world. The installation's dynamic visual impact and the wolves' cyclical struggle against the glass wall demonstrate the enduring influence of Chinese philosophical systems on contemporary Chinese art and their importance in providing a rich cultural context for exploring life and death themes.

3.3 Heritage

"Heritage" (2013) is a poignant installation by Cai Guo-Qiang that features 99 life-sized replicas of animals from around the world congregated around a waterhole as shown in figure 11 (QAGOMA, 2013). In the centre of the pool, a single drip of water continuously falls from above, symbolizing the scarcity of water and the preciousness of life. The drip of water is a crucial element of the installation, as it emphasizes the fragile balance between life and death, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. The single drip of water in "Heritage" reinforces the themes of life, death, and the interconnectedness of all living beings in relation to Chinese philosophical systems. In Taoist thought, water is a symbol of life, balance, and harmony, embodying the essence of the Tao – the natural order of the universe (Little et al, 2000). The continuous dripping of water in the pool serves as a visual reminder of the delicate equilibrium that exists within nature and the responsibility of all living beings to maintain this balance.



Figure 11: Heritage at the Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA, 2013)

The dripping water also reflects the Buddhist concept of impermanence, illustrating the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death. Water, as a symbol of constant change, highlights the fleeting nature of existence and the interconnectedness of all things (Lamirin et al, 2021). This understanding of impermanence is central to fostering a sense of compassion and responsibility towards the natural world and its inhabitants. Furthermore, the drip of water in the pool resonates with Confucianism's teachings on moral responsibility and the importance of living in harmony with nature. The fragile balance between life and death, as represented by the drip of water, emphasizes the need for humans to act responsibly and consider the consequences of their actions on the environment (Qian, 2003). The work serves as a powerful example of how contemporary

Chinese artists skilfully integrate elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism to inform their exploration of life and death themes, offering viewers unique and profound insights into the human experience.

3.4 Sky Ladder

"Sky Ladder" (2015) is a thought-provoking installation by Cai Guo-Qiang, featuring a 1,650-foot-long ladder made of fire and smoke, which extends from the ground into the sky as shown in figure 12 (Cascone, 2015). The work draws inspiration from the artist's childhood dream of climbing a ladder to the heavens to retrieve a lost kite. Symbolically, "Sky Ladder" represents the human desire to transcend the physical realm and connect with the spiritual world, exploring themes of life, death and the metaphysical. The artwork's connection to Chinese philosophical systems is evident in its exploration of life and death themes. In the context of Confucianism, the ladder illustrates the human aspiration to achieve moral and spiritual perfection, being interpreted as a metaphor for the cultivation of virtues, an essential aspect of Confucian thought (Zhuo, 2019).



Figure 12: 1650-Foot-long flaming Sky Ladder (Cascone, 2015)

In relation to Taoism, "Ladder" reflects the fundamental principle of unity between the natural world and the cosmos. The ladder serves as a bridge between the earthly realm and the heavens, symbolizing the pursuit of harmony and balance. As the ladder ascends towards the sky, it echoes the Taoist concept of the continuous flow of energy, or qi, that permeates all existence (Chang, 2011). From a Buddhist perspective, "Ladder" signifies the human longing for enlightenment and the release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Kucera, 2016). The upward trajectory of the ladder alludes to the journey towards spiritual awakening and the attainment of Nirvana. By transcending the physical plane, individuals liberate themselves from the suffering inherent in the human condition. Cai Guo-Qiang's "Ladder" is a compelling example of how contemporary Chinese artists interweave elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism to examine life and death themes. By incorporating these philosophical systems, the artist invites viewers to reflect on their own spiritual journey and consider the interconnectedness of existence.

4. Overview of Xu Bing

Xu Bing, born in Chongqing in 1955, is an esteemed Chinese contemporary artist whose work encompasses a range of media, probing into the complexities of culture, language and human experience. He pursued printmaking studies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing before relocating to the United States in the early 1990s, where his artistic career took flight (Xu, 2018). The art of Xu Bing often engages with life and death themes, drawing inspiration from Chinese philosophical traditions like Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. This chapter sets out to investigate the major works of Xu Bing that emphasize life and death themes and their associations with Chinese philosophical systems.

4.1 Phoenix Project

"Phoenix Project" (2008-2010) is a monumental installation by Xu Bing, featuring two colossal phoenix sculptures made from reclaimed construction materials, such as steel beams, shovels and jackhammers as shown in figure 13 (Xu, 2012). The male and female phoenixes represent the traditional Chinese symbols of rebirth, renewal and the cyclical nature of life and death. The work was initially commissioned for the atrium of a luxury building in Beijing, but Xu Bing chose to use discarded materials from construction sites to highlight the social and environmental costs of China's rapid urbanization (Guo, 2020). In the context of Chinese philosophical systems, the "Phoenix Project" embodies several key concepts. The phoenix's association with life, death and renewal resonates with the Taoist idea of the cyclicity of nature and the continuous transformation of energy "qi", assuming the natural world and everything within it to be interconnected through the flow of life and death (Little et al, 2020).



Figure 13: The pair of phoenixes (Xu, 2012)

The use of discarded materials in creating the phoenix sculptures aligns with the Buddhist notion of impermanence, reminding the viewer of the transient nature of material possessions and the importance of spiritual growth (Lamirin et al, 2021). The work also touches upon Confucian values of social responsibility and the interconnectedness of human society and the natural world. Xu Bing's choice to utilize waste materials emphasizes the need for harmony and balance between human development and environmental preservation, echoing Confucian ideas of social order and harmony (Williams, 2012). Through the "Phoenix Project," Xu Bing masterfully integrates themes of life and death with key concepts from Chinese philosophical systems. The work serves as a poignant reminder of the delicate balance between life and death, the interconnectedness of all things, and the importance of maintaining harmony with the natural world.

4.2 Tobacco Project – The Allure of Matter

The "Tobacco Project" represents one of Xu Bing's most significant works, as it critically examines the cultural, historical and economic aspects of tobacco production and consumption, engaging with the theme of life and death in a unique and thought-provoking manner. Tobacco, a crop with deep historical roots in Chinese society, has been associated with both prosperity and well-being, as well as with disease and death due to its addictive and harmful nature (Essif, 2012). This project explores the dual nature of tobacco, highlighting the complex relationship between life and death that it represents, especially in the exhibition "The Allure of Matter" where thousands of cigarettes were used to portray a tiger skin rug as shown in figure 14 (TAOM, 2011). From the perspective

of Chinese philosophical systems, the "Tobacco Project" can be seen as an exploration of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideas. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of social harmony, proper conduct and the cultivation of moral virtues, which can be interpreted as an examination of the ethical implications of tobacco production and consumption, particularly regarding the health risks posed to individuals and the potential harm to social harmony.



Figure 14: Tobacco project – The allure of matter (TAOM, 2011)

Taoism, with its focus on the balance and interconnectedness of all things in nature, can be linked to the project through the examination of tobacco's dual nature as both a source of wealth and a cause of suffering. The continuous cycle of growth, consumption, and decay in the tobacco industry mirrors the Taoist concept of the cyclical nature of life, emphasizing the interdependence of life and death (Levitt, 1999). Furthermore, Buddhism, with its emphasis on impermanence, suffering, and the pursuit of enlightenment, can also be connected to the "Tobacco Project." The harmful effects of tobacco serve as a reminder of the impermanence of life and the inevitable suffering that comes with attachment to material pleasures. By critically examining the tobacco industry, Xu Bing's project encourages viewers to reflect on the deeper meaning of life, death and the human condition, drawing upon Buddhist principles to inspire introspection and contemplation.

4.3 Silkworm Series

The "Silkworm Series" (2003) by Xu Bing is a powerful exploration of life, death, and transformation, drawing inspiration from the life cycle of the silkworm. This artwork captures the metamorphosis of silkworms from larvae to moths, highlighting the cyclical nature of existence and the interconnectedness of all living beings as shown in figure 15 (Art Asia America News,

2015). Under a Confucianism perspective, the "Silkworm Series" highlights the value of understanding and appreciating the natural order of the world, as it underscores the interdependence between humans and the environment. The life cycle of the silkworm serves as a metaphor for the human experience, illustrating the various stages of growth and development that individuals undergo throughout their lives. From birth to maturation and eventual decline, the silkworm's transformation echoes the human journey, prompting viewers to reflect on their own lives and personal growth, reinforcing the Confucian values of self-cultivation, moral development and the pursuit of harmony between humanity and nature (Qian, 2003).



Figure 15: American Silkworm Series Part II (Art Asia America, 2015)

In terms of Taoism, the "Silkworm Series" reflects the concept of the ever-changing nature of existence and the continuous transformation of energy. The metamorphosis of the silkworm aligns with the Taoist belief in the cyclicity of life and death, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings and the cyclical flow of energy between them (Chang, 2011). By observing the life cycle of the silkworm, viewers are encouraged to embrace the fluidity and impermanence of life and to seek balance and harmony with the natural world. Additionally, the transformation of silkworms serves as a poignant reminder of the impermanence of life and the inevitability of death emphasised in Buddhist beliefs. The transient nature of the silkworm's existence symbolizes the fleeting nature of all living beings, emphasizing the Buddhist concept of impermanence and the importance of detachment from material possessions and desires (Chandler, 2004). Through the contemplation of the silkworm's life cycle, viewers are encouraged to seek a deeper understanding of life and the path towards enlightenment, ultimately transcending the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

4.4 Where does the dust itself collect

“Where does the dust itself collect” is a thought-provoking installation piece composed of dust that was collected from the streets of Lower Manhattan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The dust is scattered across the gallery floor, creating a layer that covers the space. In this way, the artwork serves as a reminder of the events that took place and the impact they had on the city and its inhabitants (Fraser & Li, 2020). The dust is stencilled with a stanza from a poem by Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, which reads, "As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect?" as shown in figure 16 (Guggenheim, 2017) This phrase invites viewers to contemplate the impermanence of life and the idea that everything is constantly in a state of flux. Xu Bing's use of Buddhist philosophy in this piece emphasizes the importance of accepting the transient nature of life, which is a central tenet in Buddhism, asserting that everything in the world is in a constant state of flux and that nothing truly exists on its own.

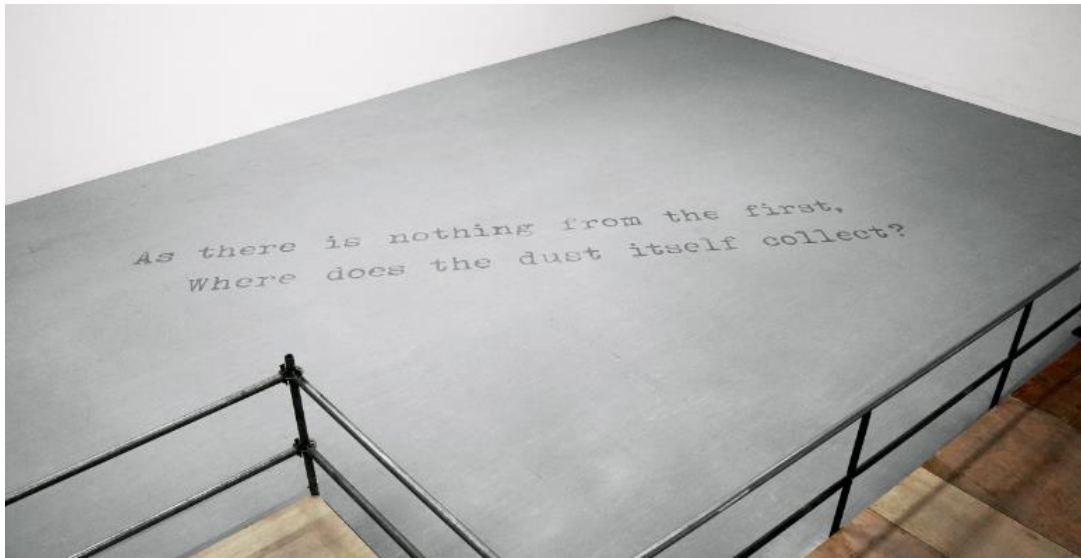


Figure 16: Where does the dust itself collect? (Guggenheim, 2017)

The dust collected from the streets of Lower Manhattan serves as a potent symbol of death, destruction, and loss, which are central themes in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. In this sense, the artwork also reflects on the fragility of life and the transient nature of human existence, highlighting the interconnectedness of everything in the world including life and death under a Taoist perspective (Little et al, 2020). This artwork emphasizes the cyclical nature of life and death and the importance of finding harmony with the natural order of things., More importantly, the significance of cherishing life and the transience of existence is highlighted, promoting an attitude of reverence for life and the pursuit of moral development that echoes the Confucianism beliefs of appreciating the impermanence of life (Zhuo, 2019).

5. Conclusion

The works of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing reflect the profound influence of Chinese philosophical systems such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which have shaped Chinese culture and artistic practices for centuries. These philosophical systems offer a unique perspective on the themes of life and death, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and the cyclical nature of existence. Buddhism, for example, emphasizes the impermanence of all things, including life and death. The concept of reincarnation, which is central to Buddhist teachings, emphasizes the continuity of life beyond death, leading to a deep sense of interconnectedness with all living beings. This is reflected in Xu Bing's work "Where Does the Dust Itself Collect," which highlights the cyclical nature of existence through the use of everyday materials and the concept of the "eternal return."

Taoism, on the other hand, emphasizes the harmony between humans and the natural world, which is reflected in the landscape paintings of Chinese artists, as well as in the use of natural materials such as gunpowder in Cai Guo-Qiang's work. The balance and unity of yin and yang, which is central to Taoist teachings, is also reflected in the dualistic worldview of Chinese art and the use of symbolism to express complex ideas and emotions related to life, death, and the afterlife. Confucianism, which emphasizes social harmony and human relationships, has also influenced Chinese artistic practices, particularly in the literati painting tradition. These traditional artists often used their artworks to express their philosophical contemplations on life, death, and the transient nature of existence, while incorporating calligraphy, poetry, and painting in their works.

The influence of these philosophical systems on Chinese art offers a unique perspective on the themes of life and death, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and the cyclical nature of existence. This can have a profound impact on the creative process of contemporary artists, as they draw upon these rich historical and philosophical underpinnings to explore these themes in new and innovative ways. By doing so, they can create works of art that offer fresh insights into the enduring human fascination with these universal experiences, while also reflecting the cultural heritage and unique perspectives of Chinese art.

Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing have created a unique and culturally rich artistic language that speaks to the complexities of human existence. This encourages upcoming artists to explore their own cultural heritage and philosophical beliefs in their creative process, adding depth and meaning to their works. However, while the influence of Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing is undeniable, it is also important to note that contemporary Chinese art is not a monolith. There are many artists who approach the themes of life and death in different ways, drawing from a variety of cultural and artistic influences. Thus, it is also crucial to recognize the diversity of contemporary Chinese art and the many perspectives that contribute to its richness and complexity.

In conclusion, Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing have made significant contributions to the portrayal of life and death themes in contemporary Chinese art. Their use of unconventional materials and incorporation of Chinese philosophical systems has expanded the possibilities of artistic expression and challenged artists to approach these universal themes in new and innovative ways. Their influence is sure to continue to shape the creative process of upcoming contemporary artists, encouraging them to explore their own cultural heritage and push the boundaries of artistic expression.

6. References

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