



# Voices of Matter: Transforming Xinjiang Elements in Contemporary Art to Counter Cultural Aphasia

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**Abstract.** This paper explores how contemporary art can address the predicament of "cultural aphasia" faced by Xinjiang's culture through the pathway of the "voice of matter." The research background is set within the global context where cultural homogenization and external narratives have simplified, fragmented, and obscured the inherent complexity and subjectivity of Xinjiang's culture, leading to a crisis of representation. Employing a methodology that combines theoretical analysis with case studies, this research examines specific artistic practices, such as the mural *Gathering at the Jade Pool* and the bone painting *The Soul of the Eastern Return*. It demonstrates that by activating local materials, the body as a medium, and everyday objects, contemporary art can transcend hollow symbol stacking and othering narrative frameworks, allowing culture to return to its material essence for autonomous articulation. The study concludes that the "voice of matter" is not only an effective artistic strategy but also a cultural philosophy, offering a universally significant path for Xinjiang and other non-mainstream cultures to achieve self-expression and reconstruct narrative subjectivity in the contemporary era.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Art; Xinjiang Elements; Cultural Aphasia

## 1 Introduction

Chinese culture has been formed through historical evolution and is constantly being reconstructed and disseminated in contemporary society, serving as an important carrier for consolidating the consciousness of the Chinese nation as a community, shaping the national image, and enhancing cultural identity[1]. The current age, defined by information saturation and technological determinism, generates a paradox of apparent diversity masking actual cultural homogenization. This dynamic pushes non-mainstream cultures with deep histories, like that of Xinjiang, into a state of "cultural aphasia." Their complex realities are systematically simplified into exotic caricatures or reductive political narratives within mainstream discourse.

The definition of culture has evolved from its Latin root "colere"(to cultivate), associated with physical land work, to encompass the entire way of life of a society. Later, Robertson expanded the definition of culture. He put forward that "Culture consists of all the shared products of human society [2]". According to Robertson,

culture includes not only material things such as cities and organizations, but also non-material things such as family patterns and languages. In a word, culture contains the entire way of life of a society [2]. While other scholars like Tylor holds that “culture is a mixture of all knowledge, belief, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by human [3]”. These foundational definitions, from Tylor’s to Robertson’s , collectively establish culture not as a static artifact, but as a dynamic and expressive system. It is precisely this capacity for self-expression and representation that is jeopardized in the contemporary media ecology. When a culture’s ability to tell its own story is stifled, its “entire way of life” cannot be fully comprehended. In 1985, the scholar Freire proposed the term “culture of silence”, which is a key reference to the use of “cultural aphasia”. He said that “The culture of silence is a super structural expression that conditions a special form of consciousness [4].” In other words, when people use a special culture term to communicate with others, they become speechless. Since then, American historian Stoler used the concept of “aphasia”to describe metaphorically the cultural “inability to recognize things in the world and assign proper names to them [5]” Later, Chinese scholar Wen divided culture into two categories: “culture with language as its carrier, and culture without language as its carrier. She proposed that the former refers to various political, historical, military, cultural, scientific and technological knowledge, traditions, and beliefs and so on, while the latter refers to cultures that do not require language as intermediary, such as architecture, traditional Chinese painting, music, Chinese tradition clothing, food, etc [6].

As a region of China endowed with unique cultural appeal and significant strategic importance, the external presentation of Xinjiang's image and the effective dissemination of related information have become focal points of attention across various sectors [7]. Xinjiang, a pivotal hub along the ancient Silk Road, served as a crossroads where Eastern and Western civilizations converged, blending diverse cultural traditions such as oasis farming, nomadic pastoralism, Islam, and Buddhism. Its cultural DNA inherently embodies hybridity, fluidity, and inclusiveness. However, in contemporary popular perception, Xinjiang's culture is often reduced to a collection of stereotypes—“song and dance, cuisine, and scenic landscapes”—while its internal diversity, historical complexities, and modern transformational challenges are frequently overlooked, whether intentionally or not. This crisis of representation is precisely the manifestation of a “cultural aphasia.”

Therefore, this paper will draw upon the specific practices of contemporary art in Xinjiang to argue that by returning to object, encompassing natural materials, the body as a medium, and everyday items, that art can avoid cultural aphasia , directly engage the viewer's senses and emotions, and thereby forge a path toward clarity and depth for the contemporary expression of Xinjiang's culture.

## **2 The Manifestation of Cultural Aphasia in Xinjiang**

### **2.1 Semantic Depletion**

While network audio-visual media have decentralized communication power, they have also reshaped the forms of audio-visual content. Taking the heavy users of short

videos, the "post-00s" generation, as an example, nearly half of them spend over two hours daily on mobile devices, yet their viewing time per single video is brief, with 48.8% of users preferring short videos that are no longer than one minute[8]. Driven by consumerism and the tourism economy, Xinjiang's cultural symbols are extensively extracted and stripped of their original contexts, becoming hollow existence. For instance, the vibrant patterns of "Atlas Silk" are endlessly replicated on souvenirs, dissolving the wisdom of craftsmanship and aesthetic codes traditionally passed down within specific regions and families. Similarly, the grand composition of the *Uyghur On Ikki Muqam* is often reduced to fragmented highlights on stage, serving as mere background music that caters to exotic fantasies. Through this process of repetitive appropriation, the historical depth, emotional resonance, and spiritual significance embedded within these symbols are evacuated, leaving behind only a visual spectacle. Together, they form a superficial ruin of symbols, which appears prosperous on the surface but lacks vibrant cultural vitality at its core.

## 2.2 Fragmented Narratives

The analytical perspective of "narrative fragmentation" is primarily inspired by the deconstruction of grand narratives in postmodernism and the discussions on the construction of the 'Other' in postcolonial theory . It describes the process through which a complete cultural narrative is severed and filtered by external viewpoints and power relations, thereby losing its integrity and complexity. When it comes to the history and reality of Xinjiang, the narratives are often fragmented into isolated and contradictory pieces. The glorious memory of the Silk Road, the lengthy process of ethnic migration and integration, and the growing pains and hopes within modernization—these inherently interconnected narrative threads are pulled apart by various forces.

## 2.3 Linguistic Homogenization

Linguistic homogenization refers to the process and phenomenon in which diverse, local, and unique modes of expression, narrative models, and aesthetic standards are eroded, replaced, or overshadowed by a singular, dominant cultural language within the contexts of globalization, mediatization, and commercialization [9].The visual language and narrative models of globalization are inevitably eroding the uniqueness of local expressions. Whether in commercial advertisements, films, television works, or online content, representations of Xinjiang are often filtered through an "Othering" lens—either as a romanticized frontier paradise or a problematized sensitive area. This homogenized language filters out the ordinary and authentic aspects of daily life in Xinjiang, the modern experiences shared by both its urban and rural areas, as well as the nuanced emotions of individuals within grand narratives. When a culture can only articulate itself through a language prescribed by the outside world, its most authentic voice is silenced, plunging it into a profound state of aphasia.

### 3 The Modalities of the "Voice of Matter"

#### 3.1 The Voice of Material

The texture of materials plays a crucial role in shaping the artistic conception of a work. The combined use of diverse materials with distinct textural characteristics can create rich and varied atmospheric effects [10]. The materials themselves bear the memories of geography, history, and culture. The materials such as the soil, poplar wood, wool, jade, and even salt are never neutral. By employing these local substances, artists enable the materials to "speak for themselves." Artist Chen Yufan's latest solo exhibition presents a project named *A Rolling Stone* that consumed the artist for two years and transcends mere physical assemblage (See Figure 1). He gathered over three thousand anthropomorphic branches from his hometown, piling them into a solitary mound, their interstices stuffed with unspoken sentiments—including the anguish of "illness" stemming from a family member's affliction, and the "political" frustration arising from repeated exhibition postponements due to external circumstances. It is precisely this state of being "indescribable and unutterable" that acutely touches the core symptom of "cultural aphasia." Chen's practice here can be interpreted as a transcendence of this aphasic dilemma—he refuses to be spoken for by grand, reductive narratives, instead activating a "local grammar" grounded in the materials of his homeland. Thus, the work becomes a "cultural island": it neither succumbs to assimilation by mainstream discourse nor allows itself to be utterly obliterated by silence. Through a mode akin to "material storytelling," it materializes and spatializes those emotions and traumas that remain difficult to articulate or classify within specific cultural contexts.



Fig. 1. Rolling Stone



Fig. 2. Tajik Eagle Dance

### 3.2 The Voice of Body

The body is both a vessel of culture and a medium of expression. In the contemporary art of Xinjiang, bodily performance has become a powerful mode of discourse. Through the laboring, ritualistic, and enduring presence of the body, artists fuse personal experience with cultural memory. The slow, repetitive movements of a dancer might reenact an ancient ritual or articulate the anxiety of identity under the pressure of modernity. The fundamental posture of the *Tajik Eagle Dance* mimics the mountain eagle (See Figure 2): the dancer may twist their waist and bow forward, raising both arms behind them, evoking an eagle soaring through the sky; or gently sway their arms while shifting steps and glancing back, like a vigilant eagle patrolling mountain valleys. At times, they stamp their feet, nodding their head as if imitating an eagle playing joyfully; or, with chest raised high, they pull their arms in and press their palms down while stepping and turning backwards, strikingly similar to an eagle launching itself towards the sky. This physical vocabulary transcends the limitations of verbal expression, offering a way to counteract cultural aphasia. When language falls short or is suppressed, the body becomes a living archive. Through gestures rooted in labor, ritual, and endurance, artists and performers do not merely represent tradition—they reinscribe it into contemporary consciousness. The dancer's body, like that of the Tajik eagle dancer, does not simply “depict” the eagle; it becomes the eagle. It does not just “tell” a story—it enacts memory. In this way, the body resists simplification, politicization, or erasure. It carries what words often cannot: the tactile sense of history, the rhythm of ancestral land, and the silent wounds of cultural transformation. Through such embodied practice, the body remembers what culture must not forget.

### 3.3 The Voice of Objects

Since ancient times, Xinjiang has been a region inhabited by multiple ethnic groups. Over the long course of history, the cultures of various ethnicities have collided and integrated here, gradually forming a unique cultural landscape. Grounding efforts in the actual conditions of Xinjiang and drawing upon its rich cultural resources serve as the crucial foundation for telling the stories of Xinjiang well [11]. Everyday objects are

microcosms of the lived world. An old saddle, a handcrafted ceramic pot, a piece of inherited clothing—each is imbued with the emotions and memories of a specific way of life. By liberating these mundane items from their functional contexts and repositioning them within new settings (such as art galleries), contemporary art unlocks their latent poetic and narrative potential. As "ready-made article," they cease to be mere utensils and transform into witnesses of history, vessels of culture, and symbols of emotion. Their wear and tear, repairs, and marks of use silently narrate the minute, concrete stories of individual lives, weaving together a cultural tapestry far more vivid and authentic than any official narrative.

## 4 An Analysis of Artistic Pathways to Overcoming Cultural Aphasia

### 4.1 Mural Painting Against Cultural Aphasia

Gong Jianxin's artistic practice offers profound insights into addressing "cultural aphasia." What he fundamentally shattered was the aphasic dilemma of "othering" frontier culture. Within this predicament, regional culture is often reduced to exaggerated symbols or rigid narratives, its inherent richness and subjectivity silently erased in the process of representation. However, Gong Jianxin's life experience—being born and raised in Xinjiang—enabled him to fundamentally avoid the detached perspective of an external observer. His immersive engagement in playing the music and performing Xinjiang dances, described as "ecstatic and fervent," signifies that he was not merely "performing" culture but truly "living" it. This profound integration into the cultural fabric endowed him with the authentic authority and emotional depth to speak from within the culture.

This distinctive quality is masterfully manifested in his mural *Gathering at the Jade Pool*. Rather than presenting Xinjiang elements in isolation, he creatively integrated them into the formal language of Dunhuang's flying apsaras and the classical color system of *The Assembly of the Immortals*. By shaping dancing and musical figures through fluid arcs and punctuated straight lines, and employing techniques such as "raised relief and color filling" alongside hues reminiscent of ancient silk, he accomplished a significant cultural dialogue: he seamlessly connected Xinjiang's vibrant vitality with the profound and extensive artistic lineage of Chinese civilization. In his work, Xinjiang culture is no longer an "other" that requires external interpretation and definition. Instead, with its full-bodied and confident posture, it becomes an integral part of the pluralistic and unified, ever-renewing Chinese civilization, achieving a truly profound and autonomous "voice of matter."

### 4.2 Bone Carving Against Cultural Aphasia

In the realm of international communication, Xinjiang has been continuously advancing across various fronts. On one hand, the content creation has become more substantial, with increasingly diverse perspectives and approaches [12]. Gendengjiafu's

practice profoundly demonstrates how to counteract cultural aphasia and achieve autonomous articulation of ethnic history by activating local materials and craftsmanship. As a descendant of the Mongolian ethnic group who has settled in a county town, he stands at the intersection of nomadic traditions and modern life, personally witnessing the risk of narrative fragmentation brought about by shifts in cultural context. However, he did not allow the history of his people to fall into a state of "aphasia" within mainstream discourse. Instead, he discovered an artistic language rooted in the essence of nomadic civilization—bone carving.

His monumental bone painting, *The Soul of the Eastern Return*, represents the pinnacle of this approach. This three-meter-long artwork, composed of thousands of sliced sheep and cattle horns, achieves its significance not merely by "depicting" the historical scene of the tribe's eastern return, but by enabling this history to speak through the most fundamental material remains of nomadic life—the bones themselves. These animal bones, once used to make sewing needles, combs, and hair accessories, carry the complete daily life memories of the people of Xinjiang. When Gendengjiafu transformed them into a medium for artistic creation, he essentially elevated a nearly forgotten "craft of living" into a powerful "craft of historical narration." The texture, light, shadow, and solemnity of the rising sun, the galloping warriors, and the trudging oxcarts in the composition rely entirely on the natural colors and textures of the bones. This creates a perfect unity between theme and material in *The Soul of the Eastern Return*: the arduous and solemn epic of the eastern return is "narrated" in a silent yet eloquent manner by the very bones of the livestock that shared this destiny. It breaks through the limitations of relying solely on written records or external perspectives to recount history, allowing the culture to emit its authentic and powerful voice through the "objects" most familiar to itself.

Thus, Gendengjiafu's bone carving art successfully integrates a marginalized local knowledge with a grand ethnic historical memory, transforming them into a contemporary artwork with strong visual impact and spiritual resonance. This not only addressed the artist's personal economic and artistic pursuits but, more importantly, provided a model for how to effectively articulate the multicultural richness of Xinjiang in the contemporary era: by returning to the material essence of the culture, enabling the "voice of matter" to cut through the fog of narrative and reach the soul of history, thereby reconstructing the subjectivity of its own narrative on a broader cultural stage.

## 5 Conclusion

This research, grounded in the context of the risk of "aphasia" faced by Xinjiang's culture within the contemporary information ecology, has thoroughly investigated its specific dilemmas of being simplified into spectacular symbols, trapped in narrative fragmentation, and subjected to linguistic homogenization. Through a theoretical elaboration of the three modalities of the "voice of matter" and case studies of Gong Jianxin's mural and Gendengjiafu's bone carving, this study concludes that contemporary art can effectively break the deadlock of cultural aphasia by returning to the cultural memory of materials, the ritualized expression of the body, and the life narra-

tives of objects. This pathway allows culture to bypass externally imposed modes of discourse and speak directly through its most authentic and vibrant material carriers, thereby reconstructing its own subjectivity and right of interpretation within the contemporary cultural landscape.

However, this study also has limitations. Firstly, the case studies focus on artists who have gained a certain level of recognition, potentially overlooking more grassroots or unrecognized practices, and thus may not fully represent the complete picture of this pathway. Secondly, the exploration of how the "voice of matter" might extend into different media (such as digital art) and its boundaries of effectiveness remains insufficient. Future research could build upon this foundation to further investigate the evolution of the "voice of matter" mediated by technology and conduct broader comparative studies on the applicability and limitations of this pathway across different cultural contexts.

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