

IDEOGRAMMIC METHODS:

The Space of Writing & Tradition in
Contemporary Chinese Long Poetry

Chinese Writing & the Epic

C. H. Wang 王靖獻
(a/k/a Yang Mu 楊牧, 1975):

1. THE EPIC QUESTION

ONE OF THE QUESTIONS about Chinese literature raised repeatedly since the turn of the century, but obviously not before, is the "epic question." Informed scholars find it vexing that the Chinese do not seem to have expanded an epic at the time when poetry began. Wang kuo-wei^a, convinced that the epic is the highest of all genres, determines that the Chinese can have little pride in their literature now that the deficiency is evident.¹ Ch'ien Chung-shu^b notes in his discourse on poetry and history, the two most celebrated areas in the Chinese humanities, that only the epic combines the two, and he implies that China does not have it.² Western scholars of Chinese literature agree.



Chinese Writing & the Epic

Ezra Pound (1934): **He puts (or his ancestor put) together the abbreviated pictures of**

ROSE

CHERRY

An

IRON RUST

FLAMINGO

TH That, you see, is very much the kind of thing a biologist does (in a very much more complicated way) when he gets together a few hundred or thousand slides, and picks out what is necessary for his general statement. Something that fits the case, that applies in all of the cases.

But whe The Chinese 'word' or ideogram for red is based on something everyone **KNOWS**.

he go abou Fenollosa was telling how and why a language written in this way simply **HAD TO STAY POETIC**; simply couldn't help being and staying poetic in a way that a column of English type might very well not stay poetic.

He is to
isn't paint

Pound's “ideogrammic method”

Tching prayed on the mountain and
wrote MAKE IT NEW
on his bath tub
Day by day make it new
cut underbrush,
pile the logs
keep it growing.

立
木
新

新^{hsin¹}
日^{jih⁴}
日^{jih⁴}
新^{hsin¹}



Ezra Pound (1885 – 1972)

Yang Lian 杨炼

- Born 1955, Switzerland
- Raised in Beijing
- Sent for “Labor Re-education” in 1974
- Criticized in 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign
- In exile since 1989
- New Zealand citizen, currently residing in London
- “There is no international, only different locals”
沒有国际，只有不同的本地



Yang Lian on Ezra Pound

Ezra Pound encountered Chinese characters when he borrowed Fenollosa's notes, which led him to the translation of classical Chinese poetry... His theory of images enabled him to open up the Chinese script, allowing us to see, for the first time, the precise movements of the gear wheels inside these little black boxes which had been sealed for millennia ... All of my work in poetry can be seen as an effort to continue inventing from images.

on Pound & Derrida

John Cayley with Yang Lian:

Given the translingual, transcultural engagement that both Pound and Derrida require—as *a matter of necessity*—...there must be no sense, other than tactical, in which any relations between distinguishable systems of inscriptions are hierarchically ordered, with one system realizing or bringing to completion what may or may not be inscribed in the other ... Thus Derrida, willingly, and Pound—notoriously—*against* his will ... were both deconstructors of centrism.



“Said the Self-Possessed” 自在者說
Heaven ☰ & Wind ☱

“In Symmetry with Death” 與死亡對稱
Earth ☷ & Mountain ☶

“Living in Seclusion” 幽居
Water ☵ & Marsh ☴

“The Descent” 降臨節
Fire ☲ & Thunder ☳



Yi: Earth 3 (Wu Zetian) 地•第三（她：武則天）

把手伸進這土裏 摸鼻孔 嘴 生殖器
折斷的脖子 浮腫的腳
把手伸進土摸死亡

.....

雙乳坐北朝南，諸天星象繽紛神女

.....

而兵火風水相顧無言： 歸去來兮
胡不歸

.....

無字碑文於萬載茫然裏似笑非笑，斑斑
脫皮

.....

她信筆杜撰一個名字：日、月和天空

.....

翻開一塊乾淨的石頭
什麼也沒有

Stretch a hand into the earth touch a nostril mouth
genitalia
a broken neck swollen feet
stretch a hand into the earth to touch death

...

Breasts seated North pointing South, constellations
like a swarm of goddesses

....

And the geomancy of warfare fire looks on without
words:

hie thee back

wherefore dost thou not return

....

The wordless epitaph laughs with no laugh in ten
thousand-year blankness, flaking and peeling

....

With belief in the brush she fabricates a name:
the Sun and the Moon and the Sky

....

Turn over one clean stone
And nothing

Not Writing History 史之闕文

- Confucius 孔子:

子曰：吾猶及史之闕文也……今亡矣夫

The Master says: I can remember when Historians would leave gaps in their writing ... oh, but this no longer happens now.

- Ezra Pound (*Canto XIII*):

And even I can remember

A day when the historians left blanks
in their writings,

I mean for things they didn't know,

But that time seems to be passing

Not Writing History 史之闕文

她信筆杜撰一個名字：

With belief in the brush she fabricates a name:

日、月和天空

the Sun and the Moon and the Sky

嬰

Jacques Derrida:

If writing is no longer understood in the narrow sense of linear and phonetic notation, it should be possible to say that all societies capable of producing, that is to say of obliterating, their proper names, and of bringing classificatory difference into play, practice writing in general.

Xi Chuan 西川



Penname of Liu Jun 刘军

Born 1963

Graduated from English dept., Beijing University 北京大学, 1985, with thesis on Ezra Pound's Chinese translations

Currently teaches Classical Chinese Literature at Central Academy of Fine Arts 中央美院

from “Answering Venus” 回答启明星

26.

赤县神州，有过许多大帅
都是土匪出身

28. 辛亥革命1911

钢枪。大炮。天使的营房。
那些凶狠的家伙
够他们一呛

29. 日俄旅顺监狱

走廊。尘土之门。月光之手
在辽东半岛的南端
一千名囚徒倾听大海的潮汐

30. 庞德

孤独的埃兹拉·庞德剥开桔子皮
当月亮无声地滑过大西洋上空
埃兹拉·庞德想念全人类

26.

The Middle Kingdom of Cathay, where many generals
started out as bandits

28. THE REVOLUTION OF 1911

Steel guns. Cannons. Angel barracks.
Enough for those violent types
to choke on

29. LÜSHUN PRISON

Corridor. Dust-covered gate. Hand of moonlight
on the southern tip of Liaodong peninsula
one thousand prisoners listen to the tide

30. POUND

lonely Ezra Pound peels a tangerine
when the moon soundlessly slips through the Atlantic sky
Ezra Pound broods on the whole of humanity

from “Thirty Historical Reflections” 鉴史三十章

一个写字的人

八十根木简，像一群小老头命运相连。木简上介乎篆隶之间的文字难以辨识，但它们所表达的有关天下、国家、战争与圣贤的思想丝毫未变。

他用毛笔蘸着墨汁，一笔一划地工作，不允许出现一个错字

他有意或无意地改变了某些字句，他有意或无意地在他人的见解中保留下自己的气息。他从一个谦卑的抄写者，无意间变成了那高深作者身旁一位小小的作者，像一只蚂蚁，拉住一只逆风而起的思想的风筝。

它像一部伪书重返文明的现场。而那个写字的人，仿佛从未出生。他是大地上的一粒尘土，曾经在有限的范围内传播过文明。

That Person Writing

Eighty wooden slips, like a line of old men linked by fate. The seal script writing interposed in the slips is difficult to discern, but what it conveys about heaven, the state, war, and the thoughts of the sages remains unchanged.

He dips his brush in ink, working stroke upon stroke, permitting himself not one false word

Wittingly or not certain words are altered, wittingly or not he retains his own breath within the views of another. From a humble stenographer, he unwittingly transforms into a minor author beside a great author, like an ant tethering thought's kite against the wind.

Like a forgery re-entering the site of civilization. And that person writing, it's as if he had never been born. He is a speck of dust on the earth, disseminating civilization in its limited way.

Xi Chuan on World Literature

Only by reimagining the world and our lives through tradition will we be able to confront the worlds and lives imagined by other cultures, particularly when those other traditions have borrowed elements of Chinese culture, and in this way engage in real dialogue with the rest of the world—a dialogue with the world that is ultimately a dialogue with ourselves. This doesn't mean a shallow “fusion of East and West”... rather, it is a response to Goethe's call for a *Weltliteratur*.

