

China From Where We Stand

China From Where We Stand:

*Readings in Comparative
Sinology*

Edited by

Kate Rose

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INTRODUCTION

What is Comparative Sinology? *China from where we stand* brings together powerful, diverse voices to define the boundaries and possibilities of this new field. In today's global academic landscape, there are National Studies in China, and then China Studies (Sinology) abroad. Here, we are bridging this gap. We are bringing perspectives together: insider, outsider and in-between, with China as our center. This approach exemplifies a new China: progressive, outward-looking, yet reflective.

In the last forty years, great strides have been made by movements that were first marginal, but then gained ground at the center of academic thought and research, such as women's rights, civil rights, and post-colonialism. All of these advocated for acknowledging the subject position. They argued that the neutrality or universality claimed by dominant scholars is an illusion. Focusing on how people study China differently depending on their own background, and the way Sinology differs from country to country, sheds light not only on China, but also on other countries, on individual and national subjectivities, and on interactions between China and the world. How do different nations perceive China? How is this shaped by historical processes and sociological values? What are the influential political, cultural, and economic factors? **Such questions allow us to move beyond stereotypes, generalizations, or the quest for a scapegoat, unmasking biases in how China is viewed particularly by the West, while honoring a plurality of viewpoints.**

Comparative Sinology studies how China has been studied. In today's world of hybrid, hyphenated identities, we cannot confine such studies to how non-Chinese study China. What does it mean to be Chinese? When does it stop, when does it begin? What about children of Chinese parents born and raised abroad, or even children of foreign parents growing up in the Chinese school system? How about when just one parent is Chinese, or a grandparent? But also, how about Chinese scholars in China who do their research and teaching in English, studying China comparatively in relation to another place? And scholars outside of the mainland, also influenced by their histories, or from various parts of China: the

differences between rural and urban, outside the main universities and within them... Perhaps the latter could be included in National Studies; however, when there is a comparison made, and it is informed by an international perspective, then this can also be a fruitful addition to the landscape of our research.

In June 2015, our university, China University of Mining and Technology in Xuzhou, held the First International Symposium on Comparative Sinology. 15 scholars came together, representing countries ranging from Korea to Nigeria, Slovakia to Singapore, as well as France and the United States, Hong Kong and Macau, and various parts of mainland China. *China from where we stand* features revised versions of the presentations they gave, making these accessible to specialists and non-specialists alike. One goal of our symposium was to revise some of the conventions of academia, with a non-hierarchical approach, inclusion of personal experience, and participants who *present research* rather than *give a paper*. The goal was to encourage a lively exchange of ideas in a convivial yet rigorous setting, with scholars taking the risk of facing an audience in a personal way. This is in keeping with the idea of being open about one's own subjectivity. We are influenced by our own cultures, which can give us additional insights and build bridges for others to come and view China from where we stand.

"Patterns of Thought," (Part 1) brings together three distinct voices that blend ways of thinking from two or more cultures, creating a new, hybrid framework. **Joey Chin**'s work is both poetic and academic, personal and theoretical. With English as her first language, Chinese as her mother tongue, she has devised a unique genre of poetry which chooses a Chinese character and then writes in English using the same number of lines. Beyond etymology, she makes startling new connections between the two languages, uniting human emotions through common syllables and symbols. While mentioning her early experiences in a polyglot community, where the women in her family were pragmatic foremothers in linguistic innovation, code-switching and mixing (they didn't want the kids to know what they were saying), Joey Chin consistently uses the personal in service of the unknown in poetry, that glimpse of discovery representative of a universal longing. That longing is expressed in the silent eloquence of Taoism—a universal that is also present in British poetry, as **Wang Mengjing** suggests. Whereas it is common for a Western analytical framework to be applied to Eastern texts, she does the opposite. Here, Chinese philosophy unlocks the yearnings of Browning's poems, and tells us what is said through the image and metaphor of silence,

between the lines of the poem itself. While Wang Mengjing connects Chinese traditional thought to the poetry of Britain, **Adetoro Banwo** links it to the politics of Africa. He makes a bold connection between one of the founding fathers of Chinese culture, the Duke of Zhou, and former South African president and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Nelson Mandela. With deep and intricate knowledge of traditional political systems in Africa and China, Adetoro Banwo makes parallels between the two systems, and suggests answers to today's political dilemmas through looking back to models in which leaders have divine responsibility to care for their people. Is it possible that a new political theory, inspired by traditional China and Africa, can give our "global village" a peaceful and sustainable future?

"Literary Minds" (Part 2) offers comparative perspectives on China's literature, in the past and up to recent times. **Wu Gefei's** article traces the nature-childhood link through Chinese and British poems. With observations that shed light on China today, he draws from history, religion, philosophy, and extensive literary examples. He discusses how China's rapid growth has led to different kinds of yearnings than in Britain, whose progression to modern society took place over a longer period of time. Poetry exalting childhood—its spontaneity and connection with all that is wild—reflects a universal impulse that functions differently, depending on when industrialization has occurred. Values and moral fiber of China have remained relatively unchanged in the past centuries, and there is not, as in the West, a pronounced desire to return to a natural world that was left behind. Beyond universal impulses in literature, it also happens that Chinese abroad, like other minority authors, are required to conform to stereotypes in order to gain Western readers. **Zhang Hua** discusses novels written in French by authors of Chinese origin, who may be following a "recipe" for success—and this success has been substantial in recent years. It may come at a price: clichéd criticisms of China, exoticized homelands, and, in this case, pandering to France's own language, literature, and culture. The historical reasons leading to this recent success, including France's feeling of decline from former glories, are elaborated with close readings of two bestselling Franco-Chinese novels. Also highlighting the difficulties in gaining Western readership for authentic Chinese literature, **Xue Wei** discusses the "ever-suffering" problems of translation and politics. She suggests an unwillingness of Western readers embrace truths about China, preferring to fit China into their own requirements. Using examples from both ancient and contemporary texts, Xue Wei compares the texts that have been successful in the West (though often not liked by Chinese readers), and those that

have not. Part of the problem lies in translation, and particularly in balancing Chinese translators' desire for authenticity and the Western inclination towards accessibility. She highlights some common cultural misunderstandings that have driven the West away from some essential novels, and suggests strategies for presenting China's rich and varied literary production and specific literary and cultural idioms. One trend in Chinese literature today that is little known in the West is youth literature. **Sun Guirong's** article explains the reasons for this phenomenon and discusses some of its dominant themes, including with regards to gender. As most texts have not been translated (and those that have are not necessarily representative), hers is a valuable contribution to understanding Chinese literature, Chinese youth, and perhaps the country's rapidly shifting mentality.

"Early Ventures with China" (Part 3) focuses on encounters between China and the West, and their influence on individuals and cultures. **Zuzana Dudášová** explores the surprising link between Mandarin and the Hungarian language, as well as songs and poems from each country's folk traditions. With insights from linguistics, history, and musicology, she finds melodies and sounds that are shared between these cultures, and suggests the reasons for and implications of this little-known historical meeting of minds and hearts. Also on the theme of unlikely encounters, **Kate Rose** describes how an American woman pursued her own quest for transcendence by travelling through remote areas of China in 1911. In an earlier coming together of spiritual traditions, **Liu Jingjing** highlights the contributions of a 17th century Chinese philosopher who attempted to reconcile Confucianism with Christianity, arguing that their core teachings were already the same. Liu Jingjing suggests that Confucianism is closer to Christianity than to Buddhism. In light of China today, where Confucian ideals stand prominently beside socialist proclamations, this is an interesting statement in favor of a harmonious future for China's Christian community.

"A Meeting of Worlds" (Part 4) concludes this book with two essays by Americans living in China, and articles by a Korean and a Chinese scholar regarding Korean-Chinese relations within the international framework of our times. Having taught in China for several years, **Anthony Newton** offers observations on China from the standpoint of someone from small-town America who moves to a traditional Chinese city. The images and anecdotes he relates show faces of a lesser-known China rarely discussed abroad, yet integral to the fabric of daily life (children in split pants, women knitting while walking down stairs,

families piling sleeping children on motorbikes...). From such observations, Newton makes an important distinction: between good/bad versus normal/abnormal— notions that are frequently confused, implicitly or explicitly, in our daily lives and politics. Exchange between cultures as disparate as China and the U.S. requires readjustment, in good faith, of our “normal meters,” and a recognition that the “abnormal” might actually be appropriate for a given culture, or even universally. Perhaps, for example, the U.S. could perform a positive act for the environment by using China’s system of “elimination communication” (as some progressive people in America are actually doing) rather than systematically putting diapers on babies and children all the time... Using a different but equally socially-engaged framework, **Mi-Ae Li** has provided the first in-depth research on the *Chaioxianzu* ethnic minority of China and South Korea, and their position as migrant domestic workers influenced by socialist history and ideology. Refusing the usual stereotypes of “global servant,” these women are using socialist rhetoric to elevate their status as workers, and actively negotiating suitable work conditions with their employers. Contesting the usual roles of oppression and domination, their negotiations are bringing about positive changes in these women’s lives, and perhaps influencing the overall paradigm for immigrant domestic workers. Also challenging the usual hierarchies, **Zhang Bailing** suggests the increasing importance of the “Confucius Circle” in world affairs. Using poetic, historical, and political examples, she draws attention to core philosophical ideals that determine politics for China and other East-Asian nations. Nowadays, it is popular in the West to study Chinese philosophies; less common is it to link them to world politics. Zhang Bailing’s article bridges this gap and gives non-Chinese readers a new type of insight into why political systems are the way they are today, and how they might become. Like many of the articles, she leads readers into a deeper understanding of China in aspects little-acknowledged in the West. Last but not least, **Dale Chang** tells his story as an American of Chinese descent coming to China to learn Chinese. Chang’s quest for a teaching job in China, as a qualified and experienced U.S. teacher, was met with many instances of racial discrimination. Today, many Chinese people are convinced that the whiter the teacher’s face, the greater chance their child will succeed in having the “right accent,” going abroad, or generally absorbing English. This means that Caucasian people are sometimes hired with few qualifications (even non-native speakers), while native English speakers of non-European or mixed descent are up against invisible and visible barriers. This narrative has a happy ending, though: not only does Dale Chang get to speak with

his 100-year-old grandfather, but he also eventually finds a job teaching at a top university in China.

Like the related disciplines of China Studies and National Studies, Comparative Sinology is interdisciplinary. The four parts of this book roughly represent Philosophy, Literature, History, and Culture. There is much overlap, and every article could have been placed in at least one other category. Interdisciplinarity and redefining the boundaries of traditional academic study, including the subject position (“from where we stand”) is a goal of this book. We feel it is essential to understanding China and its place in the world today, to look at the place of each one of us. Personal connections may be explicit, as in the case of our first reading, or more implicit; but every author is certainly passionate and personally connected to the work that he or she does, and to China’s future. The practical and intellectual potentials of Comparative Sinology are vast and varied, and we look forward to further developments in coming years, and hope this book can be a springboard for them.

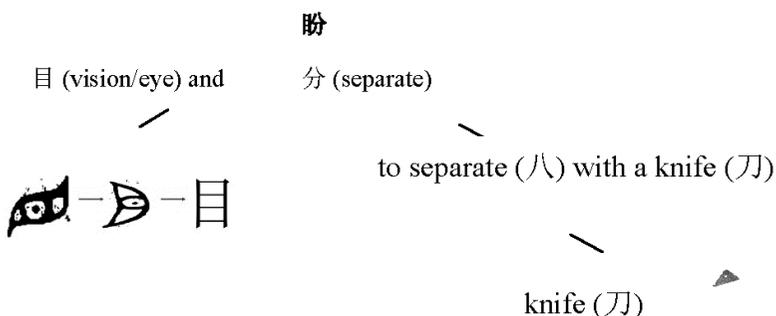
PART 1:
PATTERNS OF THOUGHT

IN TWO MINDS, OF TWO TONGUES: A PERSONAL EXPLORATION OF CREATIVE WRITING IN ENGLISH ABOUT THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

JOEY CHIN

This contribution is about poetry in English based on a form I created inspired by the Chinese character: the number of lines in each poem is equal to the number of strokes in each character. The poems seek to describe, phoneticise, or define the individual radicals and compounds, sometimes working as extended metaphors interpreted in the narrative of the English lyric poem, imagining the conversations characters have within themselves. Beyond that, this creative work is also an exploration of the process of how I write *in* English *about* the Chinese script: English as my first language, and Chinese being my mother tongue.

In Chinese, the part of the term which means to wish is “盼” (望), and the character “盼” is made of the following:



The totality of wishing and hoping is comprised of what is not present, unseen; an agonizing separation. Another character of equal interest is “爱” (love); a word used mostly in a tender context has the first four strokes in its character refer to claws or talons:



There is a prophetic, poetic and nearly macabre sense in the composition of Chinese characters, the above two just being one of the many.

My poetry uses radicals and compounds within the character as an extended metaphor:

盼 (pàn) to wish/ Separation

1.

My grandmother spent her last days
staring into the night of the ceiling,
trying to catch every quavering floater
in her vision that escapes her,
believing if she succeeds,

2

the life she is about
to be separated from
sharpens into focus and
can't be knifed away.

The poem is a textual charade or riddle (谜语) which the Chinese culture is very fond of, but it is written entirely in English: the medium of instruction and also the language I think, dream and imagine in; in spite of that, English is not my native language but then again, neither is Chinese... Drawing on the experiences of these dichotomies, I use Chinese characters as a strict framework to guide the form in poetry: *how* it is written, by means of number of lines, sounds, words, while I allow the English language to define *what* is written.

According to John Kotre, author and psychologist on autobiographical memory, what an individual selects as his or her earliest memories are “origin stories”, or “starting points established by our first memories”. When I think of my origin story, it often has to do with the inheritance of language. I am part of a closely-knit extended family and in my growing

years, we all lived in the same apartment block; sealed by ties, bound by proximity. My family lived on the 11th floor, another aunt and her own family just one story above ours, while my godparents occupied a unit on the 9th floor. My earliest memories were of a young and colourful life brightened by boisterous visiting cousins and their toys, and energetic afternoons imbued by the gossip and chatter of my mother and her sisters. Though I was curious and wanted a place in their conversations, it was clearly a world children were shut from. If any of us walked into hearing distance, their chitchat dropped to an unnatural halt like a misplaced period mark, before picking up again like a radio tuned to its correct frequency once we wandered back to our toys.

Over the years, the women devised a way to have uninterrupted conversations without the parabolic curve: they switched to speaking in dialects, using slang words, or another language altogether. If they stuck to English, they would use highly advanced vocabulary which I would not have access to at that age. Paradoxically and humorously, that was how I acquired entry to their conversations; by hearing these terms tossed so often in front of me and piecing together the events unfolding in the lives around us. When I was older and made meaning of it, they were often very not pleasant. *No big, no small*, as stupefying and senseless as it sounded, turned out to be a literal translation of “没大没小”, quite simply a rude person who could not be bothered with respecting her elders, treating them in a manner unbecoming of their seniority. *Takde wang* (“no money” in Malay) meant someone’s husband made very little and the family was struggling with finances. *Hitam manis* (meaning “black” and “sweet”) was a grudging admittance to another woman’s beauty in spite of her unattractive darker skin colour. I would catch bits and pieces about myself in their conversations: I was *jahat*... because I would... *instigate* my younger brother. In my young mind, I would shrug it off. With limited vocabulary, the word “instigate” sounded closest to “influence”: the biggest and closest word I knew starting with the letters i-n at that point in time. *So I’m an influence, not bad right*, I would think. It was not until later I found out the definition for “instigate” was an incitement to carry out something bad. Then I began to register the meaning of *jahat*: evil, naughty, mean.

Knowing how our story is coming out, Kotre writes, is like setting a beginning to explain the ending. For me, creative writing was a means for that explanation. While my conventional education in English framed *how* I would write, my family’s use of languages in our everyday lives provided a base from which I could write: the verbatim of my

grandmother's endless matriarchal tirades, my mother's aphorisms and seeming senseless familial syllogisms.

The ways for these themes to find their homes in words are elaborate and inexhaustible: there is the critical essay, literary non-fiction, fiction... but it is poetry I write in to bear witness to and, paradoxically, gain distance from these cultural expressions.

In intercultural researcher Edward T. Hall's pioneering work on routine communications, higher-context cultures rely on implicit verbal communication; a codified and shared knowledge and views of what is communicated. People look to situations, expectations and relationships instead of overt explanations in exchanging messages. In many ways, I imagine reading and writing poetry to be similar and equally high in context. Readers have to look to the quiet but emphatic poignancy in an enjambment, the echo of an anaphora, the body of a poetic form; whether compact in a tanka or meandering in prose, in order to extricate the essence of a poem. Internalized and unwritten, these techniques in poetry have the ability to collapse seamlessly into themselves to orientate a reader through the work. A poem exists outside of its text; and like the languages my family uses, it conceals more than it reveals. In other words, poetry is, too, a cultural metaphor for me: high in context, an illusionary window that opens another reality.

The first poem I ever wrote on language was simply called "Vocabulary" (later titled "Grandmother's Vocabulary"). Defined in time, intentions have a way of making their way back to us; looking at "Vocabulary" later, I did not set out to write about language although that was quite simply what it was.

I wanted to illuminate hierarchy in a Chinese family, the perils of female puberty and the generational juxtaposition of women in the family, one more educated than the last, past World War II, past the labour intensive industrialisation in the 60s, then churned into the vortex of a rapidly growing economy, all which made a difference in the education received. Learned from a British family posted in Singapore during the colonial period where she was a housemaid, my grandmother spoke some English; my mother more; but I spoke the most—and in reverse, mostly *only* English. The differences in our individual competencies of the language were like studies in chiaroscuro: paradoxically blended to make stark. During the late 70s, in order to champion bilingualism (the English

and Chinese language for the Chinese community), the government started the Speak Mandarin campaign which discouraged the usage of dialects, Hokkien, Teochew or Cantonese at home because they hindered linguistic homogeneity. For the pioneer generation who read the Chinese papers in dialect, who tuned to the dialect radio station for the daily announcement of winning lottery numbers and radio drama in dialect, it was akin to having their aural senses muffled and tongues tied: for a generation's acquisition of two languages, the one before left theirs behind. In progress, we learn some, we lose some.

But beyond a historical or political narrative, I also wanted to write about my mother: her constant romanticization of youth, her glittering disco-nights. "A *disco*, not *club*," she would say pointedly, almost on the brink of authoritative correction, as though the word "club" was too plain in its pronunciation to bring out its spirit of prismatic sequins of lights and kinetic energy on a dance floor. I thought of how she later became a housewife, her shimmering Night Fever! Night Fever! nights with her girlfriends and sisters faded with marriage and motherhood. She busied herself with petty menial chores, keeping an eye on me as I sat studiously in the hall writing essays and submitting them to competitions and contests; education was an enrichment that had little place in my mother's life because it held no place in *her* mother's. Becoming a teenager was punishing for both of us: I was growing up, she didn't want me to. She constantly used the word "maturity" because *puberty*, with its sexual biological changes, as much as they were natural events, was too embarrassing for her to muster. The once open person vivacious about discotheques and late nights, embarked on using restricted codes and cryptic axioms to circumvent the virtue of virginity and the perils of premarital sex: "Don't be vain", "Don't be havoc", "Don't make yourself so cheap". The shadows of her innocuous commands continued to shame me in my teen years into adulthood, cornering me to hope I would just stop growing, yet I could not help a bit of it.

In collectivistic identity according to cross-cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede, the "we" is in the consciousness of an individual, with an emphasis on belonging. A person is not primarily an individual. It was anecdotes like those—less of my life but the lives of *others* in mine; my mother, her sisters and my grandmother, that informed my creative writing. It accidentally became an extrapolation of Hofstede's collectivist theory: an invitation to the Chinese culture explored in poetry through the metaphors and critiques of family relations and familial culture. Inevitably, language use became a by-product of these subject matters. What I have

no qualms discussing openly, my family may hide within a euphemism, talking *around* it instead of talking *about* it to save face. Linguistic hybridity like Baba Malay, a pidgin influenced by Hokkien and Bazaar Malay, added another dimension to my writing because there are words with no equivalent in English or Chinese, yet they have the ability to evocate instant camaraderie and confluence with another person who understands the context superimposed within another language. Indeed, there is nothing as equally gracious and grudging in the bittersweetness of being called “hitam manis”.

Grandmother’s Vocabulary

Don’t be *matured*, she would say,
 the consequences
 in the ultima that rises taut,
 sharpened into a warning.
 She wanted us to remain girls
 for as long as biology would allow.
 Maturity meant being fast,
 doors of innocence once exited
 to which one could not return.
 She demanded silence,
 dismissed us to a corner
 with a book or a toy,
 warned us against being
 a *havoc girl next time*,
 expending our youth on men
 or deep nights of discos.
 Curiosity in a lipstick’s pink accordion
 or the metrical beat of high heels
 meant we were *sexy*,
 something we should never be.
 Synthesized from people,
 she owned a private lexicon
 the dictionary could not match.
 My favourite senselessness
 of it was *hitam manis*,
 her convincing me even if dark and swarthy,
 I was still loved.

I started thinking seriously about writing craft only in graduate school. Perhaps structural requirements force us to think of accountability to poetics in a way that has not been contemplated before. When I began looking into the technical devices of poetry, the type of regulations that forms are ruled by, the aesthetics and boundaries of languages and writing, what stood out was *The Triggering Town* by Richard Hugo. In this collection of essays on poetics, Hugo disputes the notion that as a poet, you should write what you know. Switch, he advocates instead, your allegiance from the triggering subject to the words. To illustrate his unconventional approach, he uses the news story as an example of language use. Upon the understanding of information which the story imparts, words become unimportant, exhausted of anything else apart from what they seek to convey. The relation of words to the subject becomes a strong one but in turn, it weakens the relation of words to the writer. In a poem, the reverse has to happen: it is in developing a personal way to write about the unknown that will lead to words generating meanings for themselves and the eventual discovery of an inner life to what is written. According to Hugo, this is how power is assigned to the writer.

It is difficult to understand poetics as extreme as that. Why resist experiences: intimacy, familiarity, indignation or pleasures that give our poems their triggering subjects? For a long time, my poetry was lustrous of a familial and cultural voxpop: my creation story. There is a loyalty to them that desires, even deserves, to be honoured or reified in poetic constructs; a creative clarification to the birth and origins of these experiences. It is hard to be pulled from the magnetism of what we know and what knows us; what the matrix provides a writer—the weight of memory, the sentimentality of nostalgia, the precision that comes with immediacy, then longing for that particular experience—becomes part of the writing. Yet, loyalty to the truth means letting go of imagination. That a vain allegiance to our known lives could possibly shut the door on a poem and lock it into finality, compelled me to imagine poetics outside of the individual experience: what else can give poems their meanings? And can it ever be reconciled with my origin story?

Roland Barthes describes *Mathematics* as a finished language: it has taken all possible precautions against interpretation which no signification or appropriation can worm itself into. I wondered if documentation and confessions in poetry could be likened to Barthes' *Mathematics*; its self-

exploratory and autobiographical influences, overt and all encompassing, towering over prosody, craft and language use in its shadow. I wanted to relinquish that to focus on maximising the craft of language, instead of the *subjects* doing the writing. As Hugo writes in *The Triggering Town*, “never want to say anything so strongly that you have to give up the option of finding something better—if you have to say it, you will.”

So what is this biting point between what to write and how to allow language to direct it? How does language work to bridge a writer closer to the epicentre? Try as I might, I could not make that distinction between emotional and aesthetic distance: there were false starts, words without an elastic tension outside of themselves, and stunted metaphors.

In John Ashberry’s “And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name”, he writes “Bothered about beauty you have to/ Come out into the open, into a clearing/ And rest.” I was most certainly bothered about not being able to mine deep enough to extricate what was being risked in its expression. I was sure aesthetic did not mean *ascetic* but that was certainly how writing began to feel. There was a beauty in distance, in both literal and literary terms, that was confirmed but I was unable to see. Then perhaps, I should come out in the open, to take a break from *poesis* and turn to the *pictura*.

I entered a study which looked at visuals in poetry. Instead of words and their meanings beneath meanings, I turned to non-textual cues: visual grammar and non-emotive devices, which to me was an easier sort of *distance* to navigate and comprehend. I started analysing the language of visual sensibilities—typography, shape, punctuations, white spaces versus textual occupation as literary devices germane to text.

In my pursuit of the covert nature of visuality in poetry, I was particularly enamoured by e.e. cummings’ poem, r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r. Though I knew the English language, I found it hard to make meaning of the discordance. The only part of immediate recognition were the words “who” in the second line, and “grasshopper” in the last, based on the circumstance that these two words are the only ones not invaded by punctuation marks or other words between them.

When unscrambled, it reads:

*Who as we look up now gathering into a T, he leaps arriving to
rearrangingly become grasshopper*

With that, the physique of the poem is unveiled: it is mnemonic of a grasshopper’s movement! Though disorienting, I took pleasure in putting together, taking apart, and conceiving the message because the

typographical construction baited my sense of recognition and orientation in unequal parts, provoking the faculties interpreting visuals and language. It was accurate in relaying the movement of a grasshopper in no other way but the employment of erratic line length, energetic punctuations and distortions of spelling. The first line has the order of the word “grasshopper” mixed up, echoing jittery motions of a grasshopper. The usage of dashes appears to connect the letters, deceiving a reader to think the word could be discerned if read in reverse but there are many jagged steps to be taken before it is deciphered:

Because of the amount of time taken to assemble the scrambled letters
 11 9 7 8 6 10 5 4 3 1 2 in the first line, the reader is set up
 r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r for equally bewildering gestures in
 the following lines. Yet, the expectation is thwarted in the next line— “who” spelt simply as it is. cummings’ grasshopper suddenly at rest! The reader has now arrived at a point where s/he was kept in suspense but now straddles familiarity and surprise. In the lines that follow, one can barely keep up with the cluster of words conjoined with other words and punctuations. The word “gathering” has been split into “gath” and “ering” on separate lines, a highly inventive invite to the reader to ponder on the syntactical ambiguity of verb or noun. The reader’s wonder is elevated because a “gathering” is an assembly or coming together, highly polar from how the word has been displaced, existing on two different lines with another scrambled word between. This duality brings the reader to an active engagement at the coming-and-going of a poem and how it changes dramatically with the unconventional breaking of words.

ice introduces a tension that is seemingly precise
 and experience of grasshopper-watching. It is further
 inte ‘leaps’ arranged to look like this:
 S

cummings understands the limitations of the written description: what is seen cannot always be written into precision and immediacy. Even if description *does* commensurate into veracity, it may not be affirmative to the reader. It is in expanding the verb into its actual visual action through typography and movement that calls upon a presence that is the satisfying and reified.

Finally, the poem finishes with a semicolon:

,grasshopper;

Ironically there is no end even at the *end* of the poem. The grasshopper makes its exit, albeit temporarily. By means of a semicolon, it represents a connection or a continuation to something else—but to what? It is worthwhile to imagine that the grasshopper doesn't disappear, it merely retires into the white spaces that follow the semicolon; camouflaged in a fringe of grass, a cake of baked soil, or curved between the curl of a leaf.

When language is expansive, altered and innovative, it can usher in a profound sense of inquiry like the wonder of where cummings' grasshopper goes after the last line; the experience like light passing through a prism. What emerges on the other side is different and quirky; a multitude of possibilities whilst retaining the spirit of words it emerged and was reflected from. When weight is shifted from writing about known experiences to language use, to rhetoric, to visual and writing craft, it brings about a deeper centre. Inversely, writing becomes *the* experience: the experience that finds the writer's personal vocabulary, creating a deeply felt and affective poem. Writing from our known coordinates, regardless of its presentation, is didactic to a certain degree but language should do more than just communicate: it can nurture the elevation of meaning through imagination.

With this acquisition, I reconfigured the usage of language outside the monopoly of communication and memory, finally understanding it is not your life or the subjects that does the writing: as Hugo mentions, "your way of writing locates, even creates, your inner life." In veering from what was frustrating, I was able to come back to it with greater clarity. Understanding Hugo's axiom did two things for me as a writer. Firstly, it showed me how successful a poem can be when power is shifted to imagination and play of language. e.e. cummings' unconventional presentation of language by means of visuals made me see an expressive weight that can be imparted to a poem: *how* it is written often goes on to augment *what* is written. The result is a piece of work where poetic meaning-making is birthed from language, not subject. Secondly, I developed a critical eye for visuals embedded in text. When I embarked on studying how they function in poetry, it was only because they were non-textual cues that did not incite anything visceral: the only non-emotional *distance* I was capable of navigating. Later, it became certain that visuals possess an actual materiality and physicality to them. Typographical arrangements, length lines and shapes are not present in a poem for

verisimilitude but carefully made for chimerical mise-en-scene and their profound roles to collaborate with language in order to enact a poem.

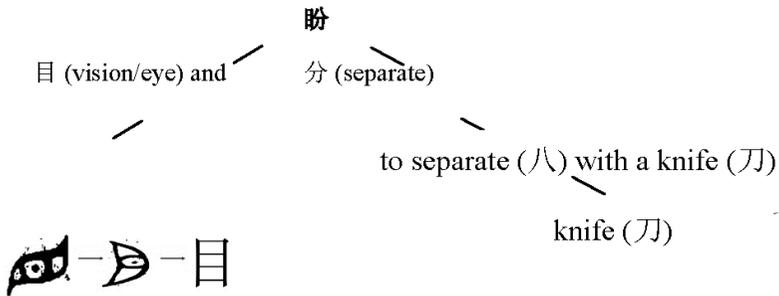
Visuals have their own set of grammar and forms to adhere to. At first, it may seem to trap the poem to work within these parameters; yet, it provides a different geometry of material to create from, and novel spaces for engagement that may remain undiscovered if we are obliged to the coordinates of memory owned. It is writing from an unknown distance that allows the imagination to augment language. With that understanding, I was able to reconcile my origin story, removed of sentiments initiated from memory and biography, with the concrete form of, quite simply, *language*.

There is no other language I know better than written Chinese for its spaciousness and generosity in accommodating multiple meanings and for their ability to evince visual imagery from its composition. One example is the Chinese characters for bumpiness and unevenness. Looking exactly like its definition “凹凸” (pronounced āo tū), the character “凹” with its concave middle means a depression or a dent, while “凸” with its upward, convex feature means a protrusion. In spite of its literal and ideographic nature, it is poetic in its natural sense—these characters can be tessellated into each other and become whole. If a bump is sanded away or a crevice cemented, there will be no gaps. The combination of both characters ensures that union.

The image of these characters side by side or into each other unlocks a poetics that is not only visual but also aural. The vowels in “凹” with its short “a” followed by a longer “o” is a soft, media diphthong that rises then falls, ending in the lips closing, while “凸” with its “t” sound pushes the air through the lips. “凹凸” as a half rhyme ending in vowels and phoneticized in the first tone of pinyin, it is as though their cohesion would give pleasure. Each character in its singularity, or paired with any word that isn’t the other, becomes less mnemonic and soulful. Though small and literal, they have an ability to be expansive: their visual composition and construction of sounds fuel the impulse of a reader to unpack imagery, create a narrative, or listen for an aural euphony.

But “凹凸” are not anomalous characters; they are just two of the many words in the Chinese language with the power to be dilated into a world larger than themselves if the eye and imagination can develop a finer analytical sensibility. In one of my favourite poems by Robert Hass,

Meditation at Lagunitas, he writes “Longing, we say, because desire is full/ of endless distances”. When the character “盼” (望), meaning “to hope” is deconstructed, it reveals the totality of wishing is composed of what is absent and unseen, resulting in an agonizing separation.



How unmistakably true and congruent is Hass’ longing to “盼”! Part of the human condition lies in the arduous journey of a person bringing him/herself closer to what s/he does not have because s/he is separated from it; hope then becomes the endless bridge s/he crosses to close that distance. If we reconfigure the way we look at “盼”, it becomes more than just its meaning; it becomes a re-presentation created out of individual meanings, arrangement and visuality.

Another character of surprising interest is the word for love “爱” which has the first four strokes in its character making reference to talons:



Talons of birds like the eagle or the hawk are used to grip prey or enlisted in times of self-defense. As mechanisms related to hunting and protection, talons are part of an animal’s anatomy to ensure survival. Their instinctive, animalistic or possibly violent properties expand and challenge the notion of what love entails. Though ideal to think of love in a tender context, we know the reality can sometimes be very different; some of our longest standing emotional altercations can arise from parent-child relationships or domestic partnerships where the idea of love is weighed heavily upon. In Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*, they

analyse metaphors for love and their connection to a bigger, overarching metaphor: that Love is War. For example, phrases as such as “I have *won* over her heart”, “She is *fighting* for her marriage”, “he *lost* his son to cancer” indicate that love can also be perceived and performed with struggle and violence with win-lose outcomes. The four strokes in the radical for talons within “爱” become a partial collective of these metaphors; claws and war; defense and attack; fight or flight; win or lose. And if the composite of “爱” is analogized in the friction of our relationships, then claw-like strokes in love really are not surprising.

Having turned a few familiar characters inside out, extricating the existences of words fastened into one another, I envisioned stories of their combined futures that would explain their roles in ascribing the character’s definition. Though I had not reached a point where my poetry could locate itself within that framework, I believed language and writing would arrive in the form of these metaphorical characters. I continued to study the 214 radicals and their combination with other words, considering how meaning remains or changes when a radical is assigned, learning about the identity affiliated with certain objects; like how 3 radicals of wood “木” make a forest “森”, clarifying if a word belongs to a certain family type; an ideogram, a phonogram or a pictograph. In the process, I thought of how radicals coincided with English phonetic symbolism. Words with a relationship to liquids might begin with the “dr” sound: dredge, drunk, drench, drain, draw (blood/water). In the Chinese language, the 冫 radical indicating a relationship to liquids can be found in the words for 沉 (to sink), 深 (deep), 油 (oil) and 漏 (leak). It was a magnificent moment, synthesizing the conceptual production of two important languages in my life; it became clear that this study had the ability to live longer and beyond itself. During my research, I realised I particularly favoured radicals relating to the human form: the eye (目), the heart (心), the mouth (口), the tongue (舌). They were perennial and elemental to human nature, more relevant than the culture, or era-specific tripod (鼎) or caldron (鬲).

I also expected that radicals could be expansive, reconstituted with other radicals or words to create a deeper expression: the radical referring to the eye can be found in the words that mean ‘to stare’ (盯), ‘to think’ (想), or ‘to see’ (看); the radical for heart is in the words that mean ‘bored’ (闷) and ‘to forget’ (忘). It was intriguing, yet inevitable, that the input of another radical—the difference of a few more strokes—could immediately

destabilise a word's meaning. In the union of two radicals, what lies before, inside, and after? How can my poetry fill these crevices? And most importantly, how can I develop a form to write about them?

I am writing “月” (moon) carefully. 4 strokes later, it is complete. Then I begin again, writing the word over and over, like a child practicing Chinese penmanship homework after having learned a new word. There is an atmosphere in writing: the first stroke a thin summer scarf, its end gently tugged by the night's breeze; the second stroke a tight line forming a ninety degree angle before flicking upwards like a tick; the third and fourth strokes in their finality connecting the first two.

How graceful, yet firm are the strokes in this character! By the time I put my blue ballpoint pen and Chinese exercise book away, I feel I have something to say: I am thinking of writing about *writing* “月”; an arts poetica piece, and my first. There is something startling, yet freeing, it seems, that the moon, an object I have no rich associations with, would decide how it would be written. It is easier to write and far more rewarding, Hugo says in *The Triggering Town*, when you can ignore relative values and go with the flow and thrust of the language. Definitive and directorial, I have never felt closer to understanding these sentiments.

But there are implications. Draft after draft, I am still struggling: a person thrown into simultaneous ambidexterity, thinking and writing the poem in English between filling pages after pages of squares with the word “月”. It is not good enough to memorise the strokes then execute the sequence in the mind. Each stroke is veritably tactile, has shape and movement. To conceive a poem is also to concurrently write and feel the swish in the *pie*, the authority in a *heng zhe gou*, and the simplicity in a *heng*, then another; a mild imitation of synaesthesia. Getting down to writing, my thoughts are governed by images of 丿. I am uttering what I am seeing in my mind as though it is a vision: 丿, 丿, 丿, or an incantation dedicated to the safe delivery of a first line.

But the words do come, and the poem does take shape months after acclimatising to the disjointed sensory process. I learned to take hold of my thoughts, navigating the simultaneous decisions of writing and thinking in Chinese and English, disparate at first before creativity learned to pace itself with sequence.

I can actually imagine the poem read at bedtime to a child discovering the character “月” for the first time. I did not think that my first *ars poetica*

would be a neat and compact quatrain, but that is how it arrived; precise and descriptive, the number of lines in the poem equal to the number of strokes in.

And quite coincidentally, that is how the form developed, and how I would write the rest of my poems.

写: 月/ To Write: the Moon

First, draw the curve to welcome the crescent,
then hand down the sun an invite to retire west.

One stroke to wave you good night,
one more to close the door that holds you.

When I scrutinize the word “刮” which means to scrape, I am recollecting all the common things that would involve scraping: paint, gum, wax, the traditional Chinese medical treatment of *guasha*. But the Chinese character for scraping is far more intuitive and profound. Its composition means “tongue” and “knife”.

Suddenly, I am thinking of Meditation at Lagunitas by Hass again: “But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread/the thing her father said that hurt her”. So much loss suffused in just two lines, the speaker’s memory alive and sharp with luminous examples of regret and wistfulness in the same sentence: *dismantle* and *bread*, *father* and *hurt*. It is equally poignant if it was also in “the way her hands *hurt* bread/ the thing her father said that *dismantled* her”, I rewrite. Perhaps it is both the tongue’s blessing and curse to hold tenderness and violence at the same time. In that dichotomy, I return to the thoughts of “舌” and “刂”, “tongue” and “knife”, “scrape” and “刮”, each word bouncing off each other regardless of its language, gaining velocity and momentum in each swing like Newton’s Cradle. Taking out these radicals embedded within the word and putting them together, I often feel like they are in simultaneous conversations with each other hosted by the character, all of them possessing an inner life unknown to the reading eye that looks to them only for information.

A sharp tongue, perhaps. I think. The sharp tongue can hurt and damage like the scraping action would. *A loose tongue. Hold your tongue. What a rough tongue.* In the irony of it, the scraping tool for its ability to drag, pull, or remove something else, remains unscathed. *Tongue in cheek.* What remains after a scrape? *A scrap. A scar. Then a scab.* I wanted to