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A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHINESE CONCRETE POETRY

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Abstract: Existing scholarship on the Chinese Concrete Poetry often privileges modern practitioners from Taiwan and theoretically concentrates on the provocations of the Western concrete poets against a linear, discursiveness in the Indo-European languages. But the case of Chinese Concrete Poetry, being an indigenous long-standing poetic form that has existed for over two millennia, is marginalized in existing accounts. The difficulty in outlining and defining Concrete Poetry in the discourse of mainland China is represented in the general lack of criticism addressing it as a historically situated genre, a long and entrenched Chinese literary legacy that has evolved over time. By analysing ancient Chinese Concrete Poetry and questioning its relevance to the 21st century poetic practices, this paper intends to discuss the employment of ideogrammic aesthetic values by the Chinese classical poets, demonstrating the use of iconicity of the Chinese ideogram as an aesthetic construct upon which to build myriad poetic visualities. This paper argues that visuality is consecrated with literary value in the Chinese classical tradition; this visual tradition in classical verse created a fundamental shift in dynamics in the critical reception of Western Concrete Poetry in the modern era of China.

Key-words: Chinese Concrete Poetry; ideogram; Liu Xie; baihua; Xuan Ji Tu

Resumo: Partindo das análises dos poemas concretos escritos no chinês clássico , este trabalho tem como principal objetivo propor que a visualidade seja uma qualidade consagrada na tradição literária clássica da China, e visa delimitar um matiz conceitual do legado ideográmico que vinha sendo penetrado na ideologia chinesa. Com base nos conceitos do Taoísmo e da beleza da linguagem poética proposto por Liu Xie (circa A.D.500), este trabalho pretende revelar os problemáticos – uma força de resistência que fundamentalmente alterou a dinâmica em termos da crítica recepção da Poesia Concreta no contexto contemporâneo da China continental.

Palavras-chave: Poesia Concreta Chinesa; ideograma; Liu Xie: Baihua (chinês vernáculo moderno); Xuan Ji Tu

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Twenties-Century Perspective on the Concrete Poetry from Mainland China

Chinese visual poetry, being a proto form of Concrete Poetry, has long existed in the overlap of belles-lettres and painting. The intriguing fact is that although the condensed visual property of the Chinese writing system served not only as the principal aesthetic touchstone for modernist poetic reforms and also continued to do so for postmodern experimental practices, it did not in due course incite a poetic revolution in the modern context of mainland China. Only in recent years, through the efforts of contemporary concrete poets as Taiwanese poet Chen Li and scholars as Tong King Lee, Chinese Concrete Poetry has been popularized to a wider readership. The story is a well-acquainted one: in the 1980s, Chen Li stumbled upon the concrete poem "Rain" ("雨") (1966) of Seiichi Niikuni, a Japanese poet that helped in introducing the Noigandres' concrete poems into Japan through translation, in an old issue of *Chicago Review* (Vol.19, No.4, September, 1967). Inspired by Seiichi's poem, Chen Li started experimenting with Concrete Poetry and went on to create the ingenious piece "A War Symphony" (1995) – a multimodal concrete poem that has come to be internationally recognized and praised. However, it should also be noticed that in mainland China, the political and social isolation of the country during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had withheld the spread of practically all of the novel art genres, including Concrete Poetry, from taking hold in the Chinese modern literature.

For scholars like Eugene Eoyang, the root of the missing dynamics of Concrete Poetry in the Chinese context lies well outside poetry itself,

> Yet the unavoidable exclusion of Chinese poets for the inevitable political reasons strikes me as peculiarly ironic, since Chinese is, of all modern languages, the most "concrete". What the contemporary "Concrete" poet strives to accomplish is precisely what many traditional poets have accomplished naturally for centuries…
>
> At a time when the Chinese language is being groomed by the Communists to serve functional ends in either science (technical jargon) or politics (propaganda), it may be Western Concrete poets who will try to preserve traditional Chinese, for the sake of a universal "concrete poetry".[1]

1 Eugene Eoyang, "Concrete Poetry and the 'Concretism' of Chinese", *Alphabet* 17/18 (1971): page 4 and 9 respectively. Cited in Andrea Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. p.82.

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By transferring the absence of Chinese Concrete Poetry to a context extraneous to it, Eoyang adduces the absence of Concrete Poetry in mainland China to geopolitical threads in which the whole body of the Chinese modern poetry became intricately entangled. Quite similar to the contemporaneous landscape of Japan and Taiwan, it is possible to draw a parallel between the aesthetic modernism to the overall modernization in social, political and economic discourse, and to reconsider in this light, the practice of Concrete Poetry not merely as an autonomous poetic movement, but rather as part and parcel of Chinese modern poetry that arose in response to the implementation of Chinese modernity, the socialist reforms and the construction of cultural consciousness. The predicament is by no means particular to Concrete Poetry or the poetic genre, but applies to a general artistic milieu. Concerning the modern literature in mainland China, one begins, in a broad view, with the observation of the founding of the Republic of China (1912) and the New Culture Movement that ensued shortly afterwards, which advocated a colloquial, vernacular register of the Chinese language and by implication, a new poetry and modern literature. The cautiously burgeoning impetus of poetic experimentation rapidly went into eclipse amid the political turbulence and the decades-long cultural movements ensuing the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This fundamentally thwarted the development of modernist practice in general. In this context, poetry as well as other art forms were continuously submitted to a politicized narrative, strictly bound to ideology and a specific form of propaganda.

Eoyang's argument features centrally in the academic discussion of the development of a Chinese modern literature to this day, which locates the Chinese modernism at the intersection of a sense of conscious "root-seeking" subjectivity, a reflexive "scar literature" resulting from the tragic experience in the Cultural Revolution and the emerging dynamism of a cosmopolitan, consumerist urban culture beginning in the 1980s. The case of Concrete Poetry in this context is largely engaged as an act of individualism, pertaining more to the avant-garde poet's self-conscious commitment to experimentalism.

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Indeed, academic discussions on the practice of Concrete Poetry in contemporary mainland China is normally confined to a small and loose branch of poets and writers, with representative practitioners including the Hong Kong writer Ou Waiou (鸥外鸥,1911-1995) and the Sichuan-born poet Yin Caigan (尹才干, b.1962). These two poets are aptly introduced in a chapter on "Concrete Poetry in China" (CORBETT; HUANG, 2019, pp.36-55) by Li Li, where a broad contour of the development of the Chinese Visual Poetry from ancient times to modernity is documented. Li Li's article represents a real scholarly advance for the examination of Concrete Poetry in Chinese, which encompasses productions from Hong Kong, Taiwan as well as from mainland China, given that they all sprang from interwoven geopolitical contexts and most importantly, share the same writing material – Chinese ideograms. The paper is enlightening in that it swerves away from the more richly contextualized Taiwan concrete poets, and focuses instead on the rather meagre discourse of mainland China, which has often evaded critical inquiry on account of the apparent dearth of poetic production of this kind. Li Li's perceptive analysis shows that the practice of Concrete Poetry in mainland China arose independently from foreign modernist currents and took a more individualistic, spontaneous form of expression. Though the visual appeal illustrated in the structural layout and variable font sizes are mostly serviceable in aiding the iconic representation of the central thematic, the alliance of form and content is justifiably legitimate. Apart from the more significant references cited above, Li Li's article also includes scattered historical illustrations of visual and concrete poetry in mainland China, albeit the occurrences are no more than sporadic and unprompted.

Recent critical scholarship in comparative literature and cultural studies refutes the fallacy that attempts to restrict reading within a certain linguistic border. Charting the development of Concrete Poetry across geographies such as Brazil, Germany, Scotland, France and Japan, this critical approach has enabled us to conduct comparative analysis in the overarching system of world literature, with an eye to the transnational solidarity manifested in the form of translation and airmail correspondence – means that immensely accelerated the transmission of poetic flows. Operating within this discourse, Concrete Poetry is critically treated as a site of cultural

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interactions between global forces (social modernization, WWII, faster international travel, boom in communications and computer science, etc.) and nationalistic concerns (dictatorship, partisan antagonism, economic policies, etc.). Yet this critical attention legitimately devoted to the international and avant-garde profile of Concrete Poetry has led us to be negligent of potentially provocative regional discourses, and threatens a more balanced and inclusive view of the entire poetic genre. This is precisely the case of Chinese Concrete Poetry.

Though Chinese visual poetry has always been a minority pursuit, it fits into the larger domain of classical literature. This means that it reflects broader cultural traditions. With this in mind, its definition should go beyond a simplistic recognition of its formal devices; rather, it should be rooted in the wider poetic traditions of classical literature. The noticeable absence of Concrete Poetry in mainland China, which I interpret to be a certain form of cultural "resistance" to the western novel ideas, is a valid point of critique as well as a convenient point of departure for the examination of Chinese Concrete Poetry as a kind of "arriere-garde" resurgence that responded to earlier Chinese visual poetry. This critical treatment suggests the possibility of other dimensions that have played into the critical reception of Concrete Poetry in the Chinese context. Investigating the specific ideological "biases" in the cultural context of the tradition of the Chinese visual poetry contributes to an understanding of the Chinese poets' withdrawal from the movement of Concrete Poetry by not merely reducing this to a geopolitical account, but by paying adequate attention to the problematics inherent in the poetics of Chinese visual poetry. What is at stake, therefore, is an understanding of the Chinese aesthetic foundation on which the genre of visual poetry thrived and morphologically evolved. To do so, we must first examine the poetic landscape of Chinese visual poetry in ancient times.

On the Chinese Classical Concrete Poetry

Although Concrete Poetry is a relatively new coinage in the twentieth century, the indigenous long-standing poetic form survives over two millennia in China. It has been described differently as "visual poetry" (视觉诗), "shape poetry" (图形诗) and

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"picture/image poetry" (图像诗). Among limited references, the pioneering study *The Introduction to the Stylistics of Poetry*《诗歌文体学导论》(2001) written by Wang Ke is of great academic significance for his comprehensive readings of concrete poems both from Taiwan and China. In the book, the Chinese visual poetry is referred to as "formally variant poetry" (形异诗). According to Wang (2001, p.181), the canonically anomalous visual poetry had been judged a questionable practice and was even described as a "weird genre" (怪体) by the stylistically rigid poets from the Song Dynasty (A.D.960-1279).

Not surprisingly, the concept of visual poetry runs counterintuitive to the principles of harmony and balance, concepts that are foregrounded in Chinese culture. To mirror essential cultural values and to resonate with the physical environment, namely nature itself, Chinese classical poetry, as well as other traditional art forms, is intent to establish a close bond with the cosmic outer world of which we remain part and parcel. Thus, Chinese classical poetry undergoes a set of harmonious developments, which we constantly find exemplified in the realm of rigorous prosodic considerations: verbal conciseness, musical consonance in rhyme and meter, formal symmetry and more often than not, a nuanced and moderate tone. A full exposition of this claim, as well as its vocal advocation, is to be found in Liu Xie's 刘勰 (465-522) monumental work *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (《文心雕龙》, circa 479-512), which constitutes the first comprehensive and sophisticated study of literary criticism in Chinese, covering a vast array of themes and subjects. In his discussion of the qualities of good writing, Liu enumerates the following guidelines (2015, p.278),

> In grouping words and composing a piece, a writer must be versed in the choice of words: first of all, he must avoid what is odd and strange; second, he must avoid characters with the same radical; third, he must weigh carefully his repetitions; and fourth, he must be balanced in the use of the simple and complex forms.

For Liu, the graphic appearance of the Chinese characters is of particular importance to writing for it appeals to the vision and is thought to be the primeval vehicle that bears

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the message of speech and expressed ideas. Therefore, if no sufficient heed is paid in this regard in composition, the beauty of the written piece may be spoiled, and it might even prompt aversion. Liu then proceeds to caution against the repetition of the same character for it creates "conflict" and would "weaken the composition", unless its occurrence is "spontaneous and natural" (2015, p.278):

> By characters of the same radical is meant several characters in succession with one radical, that is, one half of each of their forms, in common. In the description of mountains and rivers, such a device has been used in all ages. But when applied to ordinary writing, the practice is a definite defect, because it offends our sensibilities. If it cannot be helped, it may be permissible for the number to grow to three in succession. Once it is allowed to go beyond three, is it not virtually a glossary? (2015, p.279)

Liu established his literary critical system during a period when Taoism grew in prominence. It is commonly believed that Liu's critical underpinning was built upon the Confucian canon, while simultaneously manifesting a Taoist vision that places an emphasis on the inherent links between human beings and the cosmological Universe. Long anticipating Taoism, the tenet on the relationship between man and nature existed in the form of Chinese folk religion, until it later consolidated consistently into native beliefs of Taoism, Confucianism and the Chinese Buddhism. What is at issue here is the philosophical tradition that underlies the Chinese way of thinking. Epistemologically speaking, the Chinese traditional critical paradigm differs fundamentally from the Western dualistic *logos* whose analytical premise favours unyoking form from content. Yet the mainstream Chinese critics have tended to identify with the metaphysical preoccupation that advocates the unity of man and nature. Such a holistic and harmonious worldview mandates personal alignment with universal values and explores the ultimate existence of totality and balance. By the same token, Liu, in his critical system, conceptualizes the literary practice as a transcendent, naturalizing and harmonizing configuration of *Tao*, concomitant with the flow of Nature and shorn from stylistic affectation. For example, in the opening lines of the first chapter "On *Tao*, the Source"《原道》, Liu contemplates the assumption that *Tao* gives rise to everything, including "文" (literally meaning "text, literature"). Therefore, it is important to make *Tao* manifest in the writing, as he declares that, "*Wen*, or pattern,

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is a very great virtue indeed. It is born together with heaven and earth. […] The sun and moon, like two pieces of jade, manifest the pattern of heaven; mountains and rivers in their beauty display the pattern of earth. These are, in fact, the *wen* of *Tao* itself." (LIU, 2015, p.8) By departing from this norm, Chinese visual poetry easily disrupts the dialectical and aesthetic balance, and so strikes people as an unflattering folkloric literature. In the Chinese context, the poems in which visualization is particularly accentuated account for a very limited proportion compared with the huge body of traditional classical poetry. This being said, the earliest practice can be traced back to the times of Former Qin (circa B.C.350).

Chinese visual poems, though present throughout the history of Chinese literature, did not find much of an appreciative audience until modern times. This can be reflected in Liu Xie's succinct account of Chinese visual poetry that gives the origin and the earliest traces of the genre before Liu's own time. At the very end of a chapter on the development of poetry of four-words or five words to a line (四言诗/五言诗) in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, Liu writes that (2015, p.45),

> And the writing of the "Li-ho" has its beginning in the apocryphal writings. The "Hui-wen" began with Tao Yüan, and "round-robin" poetry is modeled after the lines produced in the Tower of Po-liang. Some of these forms are great and others are little, but they all aim at expressing emotions and ideas. Hence we include them all in the realm of poetry. But we shall not attempt to deal with all of them in detail.[2]

One can expand Liu's observation and infer that the Chinese ancient visual poetry was not received favourably in scholarly discussions and tended to become undefined or underdefined by poetic commentators and critics alike. However, modern critical

2 Several points in this quotation demand clarification: 1) in Shih's translation, "Li-ho" is the same with the otherwise transliterated name "*lihe* poem" (离合诗) in the current paper; 2) "Tao Yüan" – the founding father of "Hui Wen", is often related to the poet named He Daoqing 贺道庆, who lived in the era of Northern and Southern Dynasties (A.D.420-589); 3) "round-robin" poetry refers to *lian ju* poem 联句诗, which is composed by more than one poet in a way that each one contributes to one or two lines; 4) "Tower of Po-liang" suggests the Bai Liang Ti 柏梁体, an ancient genre of seven-word-each-line poem. Original text: 离合之发，则明于图谶；回文所兴，则道原为始；联句共韵，则柏梁余制。巨细或殊，情理同致；总归诗囿，故不繁云。

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reassessment prompts new perspectives on this topic. Compiled and elaborately annotated by Xu Yuan 徐元, *The Recompilation of Unorthodox Chinese Poetry*《中国异体诗新编》(2010) counts as one the most comprehensive anthologies of Chinese visual poems published so far. With an extensive inventory of over three hundred and fifty entries from a hundred and four poets spanning over two thousand years, Xu's study demonstrates that visual experimentation in Chinese classical poetry registers as a more enduring, complex and capacious topic than is generally recognized. The term "unorthodox" fittingly denotes the marginal status of visual poetry in the Chinese context and is employed here as an all-encompassing denomination under which an assortment of no fewer than sixty-one genres is subsumed, incorporating not only the visually exemplary palindromic *huiwen* poem（回文诗）and pagoda-shaped poem（宝塔诗）, but also *lihe* poem (离合诗)[3], parallel poem（排比诗）, rebus poem（字谜诗）, poems with overlaying ideograms（叠字诗）, poem that contains prohibited words（禁体诗）, double-rhyming poem（双声诗）, among others. Xu further submits these styles and genres to a more general taxonomy based on six aspects: grapheme (字形), sonic effect (音韵), semantics（词义）, word sequence /syntax（词序）, rhetoric (修辞) and reference (篇章). This catalogue yields some general insights into the specificities of Chinese traditional visual poetry. Since space precludes the investigation of all of the experimental genres, I have chosen to focus here on the aspects of grapheme and word sequence, given that they appeal most fully to the visuality as well as the pictorial quality of the Chinese written character, and consequently, they constitute the most pertinent objects of study with respect to the current paper.

For poems attentive to the graphemic realm of the Chinese written character, semantic interplay is usually elicited by capitalizing on the associative peculiarity of the

3 "li" means to separate and "he", to combine. To decipher this form of poetry, readers are confronted with the literary game of taking apart the characters and reformulating these detached parts into new characters. Hence the name "离合" – "to separate and combine".

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compound ideographs, which in a broad sense, refer to the ideograms represented by the combination of two or more separate meaningful characters. This is particularly applied to the *lianbian* poem (联边, literally meaning "combined edges"), where each verse is composed of ideograms with the same radical. One of the best-known poems of this kind is the piece "A View from the Riverside Balustrade"《水槛遣兴》by the Qing poet, Li Yang 李旸:[4]

暄暖晴晖曜，沖瀜净浪浮。霁雲霄霮雺，潜溜沼清浏。[illegible]颲[illegible]飄[illegible]，渟潆淡泻油。适通迎送迳，浑漱浅深流。俯仰偕俦侣，汪洋澹溯游。窗空窥窈窕，源活濬潭湫。酽配酴醾酿，浓添沆瀣沤。循徯徐往復，潇洒涉瀛洲。

To evoke a riverside image, the poet integrates meaning with visual "overtones", which are borne out by the suggestive radicals of each line. In the first line of each couplet, there are a total of eight radicals employed consecutively: 日, 雨, 风, 辶, 亻,穴, 酉, 彳, while a group of characters with the shared radical 氵 consistently underlies the graphemic choice of the second line of each couplet. Discrete themes become self-explanatory as they are in alignment with the symbolic connotations of the nucleus radicals. For example, as the rain-inspired radical 雨 implies, the line 霁雲霄霮雺 articulates a view of thick clouds foreshadowing rain; in the same fashion, the verse 酽配酴醾酿 conveys the idea of high-quality water that makes mellow *tumi* wine (a traditional local wine), corresponding to the radical 酉, which originally designates an

4 My literal translation of the poem：

The sun is shining in a clear blue sky, the waves gleaming on the vast river. / After the rain, the air is charged with mist, the clear streak bubbling with rushing water. / The cool breeze makes puffing sound, the brook trickling as peacefully as oil flows. / The trails have been open for passage, travellers can wash themselves up in both deep and shallow waters. / It's recommended to have company in such a trip, a group of friends can raft downstream./ The view out of window is a secluded and serene one, the fountain of the stream is deep and unsearchable. / The quality of the fountain water is perfect for the making of the mellow *tumi* wine, the surface of the river is still misty, above it there are small waves bobbing. / Walking down the trail back and forth, it is with this leisure pace (I) make (my) way to the celestial mountain.

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ancient type of Chinese wine vessel. Notably, the poet considered how the ideographic qualities of the Chinese written character has a relationship of mimesis with the semantic interpretation of the poem. Visuality showcased in this category of Chinese visual poetry hardly associates with spatial configuration or the atomization of poetic elements; rather, it more often than not stems from the inexorably interconnected etymological roots reflected in the iconic dimension. We might read this as an echo of what Fenollosa described in his reading of the Chinese classical poetry, that it defies linear thinking and is impregnated with relational force. To quote Fenollosa (2009, p.756),

> Synthetic thinking demands a pregnant language; rich, juicy, significant, full words, charged with intense meaning at the center, like a nucleus, and then radiating out toward infinity, like a great nebula. This is poetry, the making a word stand for as much thought and feeling as possible, and that through the mutual modifications of the successive words. [...] Refined harmony lies in the delicate balance of overtones.[5]

Visuality is more intuitively addressed in the genre of the pagoda poem (宝塔诗), which derives its name from an artistic arrangement of an ensemble of words into a cone-shaped pagoda. By virtue of the increasing verse length from a customary one to seven characters each line, pagoda poem is also known as “one-seven lyric pattern” (一七令) or the literally “one-to-seven-words poem” (一至七字诗). The craft of pagoda poem concerns itself principally with the sounds of the characters, usually with the last character of each line rhyming with each other throughout the poem. The pyramidal visual placement is geared more towards the poem’s vertical development, which is noncommittal to any strict, regulated genre as in the case of quatrain (*jueju* 绝句) and eight-line regulated verse (*lüshi* 律诗). To give a noteworthy example, the following “On a Mountain”(《一至七字诗·赋山》) by Tang poet LingHu Chu (令狐楚, A.D.766-837) is offered for illustration:

5 Fenollosa, “The Nature of Fine Art II”, in *Ernest Francis Fenollosa: Published Writings in English*, ed. Seiichi Yamaguchi, vol.1 (Tokyo: Edition Synapse, 2009): 756. quoted in dissertation by Johnathan Chance, *East Meets East: Georgia O’Keeffe, Asian Art and the “University of Virginia Years* (2018): 57.

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山，

耸峻，回环。

沧海上，白云间。

商老深寻，谢公远攀。

古岩泉滴滴，幽谷鸟关关。

树岛西连陇塞，猿声南彻荆蛮。

世人只向簪裾老，芳草空余麋鹿闲。

Mountain,
Loftily steep, loopily meandering.
On the ocean, clouds are drifting.
Shang Lao is seeking, Xie Gong is climbing.[6]
Age-old spring is dribbling, in vale birds are trilling.
Endless woodland connects westward the frontier, in Chu[7] monkeys' screams are echoing.
Mortal beings pursue wealth and rank, while grass lay ownerless; unaccompanied deer roaming.

(my translation)

The poem pertains to the traditional "rivers and mountains" thematic repertoire of the Chinese classical poetry. The register of the language is plain, but nevertheless expressive in the description of a landscape perceived while climbing a mountain. The central theme is not brought out until the last couplet, which relates the scenery back to the poet's spiritual longing for wilderness – a yearning for retreat from the mundane

6 "Shang Lao" 商老 alludes to the Four Whiteheads of Mount Shang (商山四皓), who were four elder men credited for the critical role they played in the establishment of the Han Dynasty (B.C.206-A.D.220); "Xie Gong" 谢公 refers to Xie Lingyun 谢灵运 (A.D.385-433), who was considered the leading poet of the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Xie was known to enjoy travelling around in the wilderness to appreciate the beauties of nature. He was also commonly referred to as Duke of Kang Le 康乐公.

7 Chu 楚 became a vassal state of Zhou Dynasty circa B.C.1030. Here Chu refers broadly to the central region of China, namely the present-day provinces of Hunan and Hubei.

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world to seek a secluded life in the mountains. Reading the poem, there is an obvious incremental pattern in line length as the couplets sequentially moving on, starting from one character to seven characters each half-line, thus allowing the visual structure to resolve itself in a pagoda shape. Also note the rhyme pattern that ends the second half-line of each couplet with the assonant "an" established in "山 sh*an*—环 hu*an*—间 ji*an*—攀 p*an*—关 gu*an*—蛮 m*an*—闲 xi*an*". Despite being modelled conventionally upon the form of a pagoda, the current poem taps into the visual register to suggest the possibility of alternative meanings, here obviously that of a mountain. This being said, the pagoda shape should not be overlooked for it is conducive to communicating the full potential of the poem's progressive structural layout.

Another visually telling genre called palindromic visual poems ("*huiwen* 回文诗") is worth mentioning here as it prefigures the flexibility of non-linear ways of reading Brazilian and other Concrete Poetry. It falls into the category of "word order/syntax" within Xu's classification. A prime example in this kind is the celebrated "Circular Huiwen Poem"《连环回文诗》: [8]

Figure 1: "Circular Huiwen Poem"

What commands immediate attention is the circular shape, frequently utilized in ancient Chinese visual poetry. As the most valorised shape in Chinese culture, the circle stands for perfection, harmony, reunion and balance, all of which are intimately bound up with the Chinese aesthetic horizon. In its fusing with Chinese classical verse, the

8 Author unknown; poem was commonly deemed to be composed during the Qing Dynasty.

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poem creates the sense that it will unfold *ad infinitum*. The shape of the poem places thought in a similar circular orbit and bids the reader to complete reading the poem by abiding by a certain order. In doing this, readers are left to their own devices to pick arbitrarily an initial character from which the verse will proceed, clockwise or anticlockwise. In the semantic domain, the poem draws on the syntactic flexibility of the Chinese language to playfully engender a constellation of interpretations. It offers, in short, a total of forty quatrains of five syllables each line.[9]

Figure 2: Handroll of 17th century, contains a portrait of Su Hui along with the facsimile of her acclaimed *XuanJi Tu.*[10]

Prefiguring Augusto de Campos's "lygia fingers" by millennia, the Chinese ancient visual poems also sought recourse to colour so as to better stimulate the percipient's sensibility under numerous varying dispositions. Created by the poetess Su Hui 苏蕙 during the war-inflicted period of the Sixteen Kingdoms (A.D.304-439), *Xuanji Tu* 璇玑图 is often spoken of as the most kaleidoscopically complex palindromic poem ever composed. With *xuanji* originally designating the Great Bear, the title literally means

9 For example, if we start with "落" and proceed to read clockwise, the poem unfolds as:

落雪飛芳樹, 幽紅雨淡霞, 薄月迷香霧, 流風舞艷花。(My literal translation: snow falling on the fragrant branch/the red flowers, and faraway, the sunset glowing fades out in the rain /the hazy moonlight mixed with the aromatic mist/the breeze is tickling the brightly coloured flowers.)

10 Image source: https://harvardartmuseums.org/art/206522

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Star Gauge Chart or *Armillary Sphere Picture*. The poem rivals the star chart itself for celestial mysteriousness, drawing an analogy to the esoteric and occult arrangement of the Chinese characters in that chart. The myriad readings map onto Su Hui's longing and love for her faraway husband Dou Tao 窦滔, emotions that are metaphorically alluded to as everlasting and glowing constellations.

The poem is composed in the shape of a 29 x 29 grid of lines, forming a square pattern of 841 characters that can be read vertically, horizontally and diagonally. The poem is also multi-coloured. Embroidered with five different colours in the fabric of brocade and silk, the palette prompts schematic viewpoints for the poem, guiding readers through meandering pathways of signifying ambiguities while unearthing the many combinatory layers the poem possesses. In the use of form and colours, these terms appeal to the related domain of painting. *XuanJi Tu* is often described as "the miraculous combination of words and images" ("奇图佳文") and represents the consummate fusion of poetry and painting – the aspect that constitutes its unique aesthetic importance in Chinese classical literature. In a conservative reading, the poem is commonly thought to give rise to 7958 interpretations of varying line lengths (ranging from three characters to seven characters each line), though a recent reassessment has brought to light a proliferation of 1,4005 possible interpretations. (LI, 1996, p.35).

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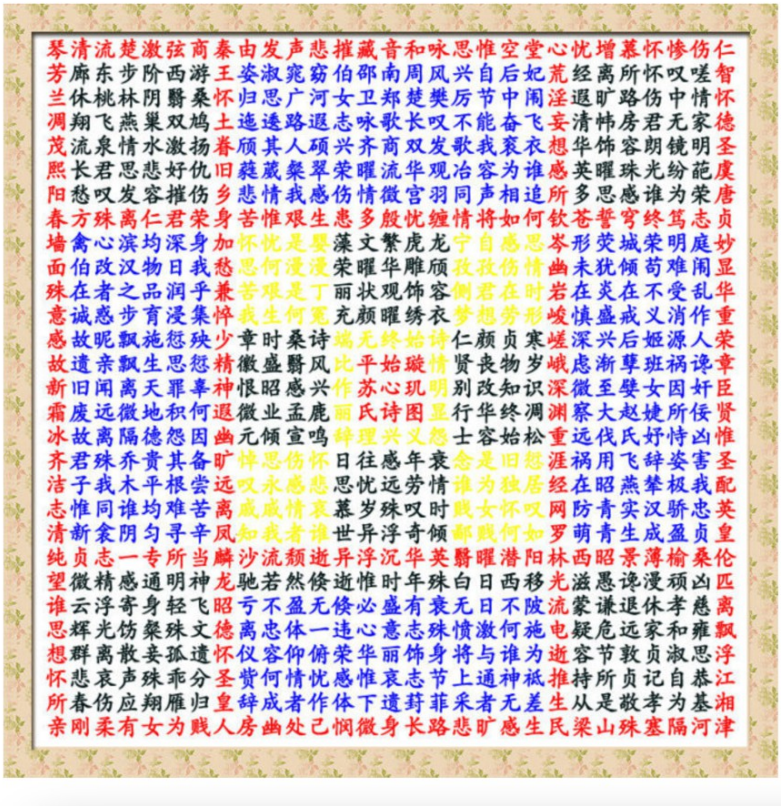

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Figure 3: *XuanJi Tu* in simplified Chinese

In accounting for the myriad interpretative possibilities, little has been said about the want of punctuation in classical Chinese or the grammatical elasticity of the Chinese language, despite the fact that both are prominent features, having the beneficial effect of an unconstrained perceptual experience in reading visual poetry in the language. The adoption of Western-style punctuation in the Chinese script was fairly late; it occurred in conjunction with the language transition from classical Chinese to a vernacular register. The first book published in a punctuated fashion was Hu Shi's

Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy (《中国哲学史大纲》, 1919) – a revised version of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Columbia. Prior to that, the classically written texts were, by a common literary standard, entirely unpunctuated. Therefore, to extract the correct sense of a phrase, one would need to master the

"method for sentence segmentation" 断句 (literally meaning sentence division, that is,

11 Image source: http://www.zkyfc.com/lishi/74761.html

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pausing at the appropriate point of a sentence), which required years of study and a high level of literacy. On this note, it's worth observing that modern, Western Concrete Poetry, which does not possess a visual tradition as old and diversified as its Chinese counterpart, has had to reinvent some of these broader linguistic characteristics of the classical Chinese visual poetry – lack of punctuation and grammatical flexibility/ambiguity. A convenient example is Gomringer's "ping pong", which can be read back and forth, and readers are not sure if the words refer to actions or noises.

The difficulty in coming to terms with meaning was further compounded by the archaic form of literary language. In regard to the written text in classical Chinese, which was a much more sophisticated and complex form than the spoken language, I shall briefly point out several linguistic characteristics that I judge most conducive to the highly ambiguous reading of classical visual poetry. For illustrative purposes, I shall base my discussion on two poems drawn from *Xuanji Tu*.

Linguistically speaking, Mandarin is normally characterized as being highly isolating and analytic. This means that unlike inflected languages, it lacks morphology. To place an action in a certain time, the Chinese language seeks recourse principally to the usage of "particles", also known as functional morphemes (i.e. Chinese speakers often use the noun suffix "们" to indicate an object's plural form) and the creation of contextual information. The placement of these particles is relatively less rigorous and, thereby, more mouldable in terms of eliciting different senses. This relates to the versatility of lexical semantics and a relatively flexible word order. In the usage of adjective and noun, the classical text, in an economy of words, draws mainly on syntactic construction to impart meaning. This is quite different to the usage in modern Chinese, where the nucleus morpheme would otherwise be expected to couple with a semantically correlated word to complement the intended meaning.[12] The concision and simplicity, nevertheless, is not achieved at the expense of logic or clarity. Taking the noun phrase 妄想 (delusion/delude) of the second line of Poem II for example. 妄 (fantasize) plays the adjective role in modifying the content of "thinking, thought";

12 Note that the classical Chinese is ripe with monomorphemic characters that are semantically functional; Yet in modern Chinese, it's observable the tendency of bimorphemic formation in expressing the same meaning.

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whereas in the third line of Poem I, the adjective 妄 behaves syntactically like a verb in the predicate 妄淫荒. The instances of 妄 in each poem is representative of the distinctive linguistic elasticity which is more conspicuously manifest in classical written texts than in the contemporary vernacular register.

What is also in evidence in classical Chinese is the frequent omission of copula and connective elements such as prepositions and conjunctions. To compound the issue further, adjectives, nouns and verbs often fall into more than one grammatical category and the syntactical effectuation of the respective function relies largely on the context. Having said this, it would be also misleading to suggest that a doubly taxonomized word could be freely used across grammatical categories. (PULLEYBANK, 1995, p.14). Consider the pair 伤惨 and 惨伤. The former is made up of the verb 伤 (hurt) that precedes the adjective 惨, conveying the idea that someone is badly hurt. Yet when situated conversely, 惨伤 follows the word order of adjective (bad) and noun (injury); the phrase becomes a noun predication meaning “bad injury”. Also noteworthy is the normal omission of the subject pronoun in declarative sentences in classical texts. (PULLEYBANK, 1995, p.13). In the current analysis, for the verse 贞志笃终穹誓苍 from the second line of Poem I, the explicit subject of the act of vowing is unexpressed. The verse, like many others in these two poems, assumes an “impersonal” tone, warranting thereby various viable interpretations. Given no special emphasis, the subject is virtually indefinite and the reader relies heavily on the contextual information to draw a proper inference.[13]

13 The observations put forward here are intended to enhance the understanding of Chinese visual poetry and serve as starting point for further examination, which, I believe, should be grounded on functional and structural analysis of the classical Chinese language in linguistic terms.

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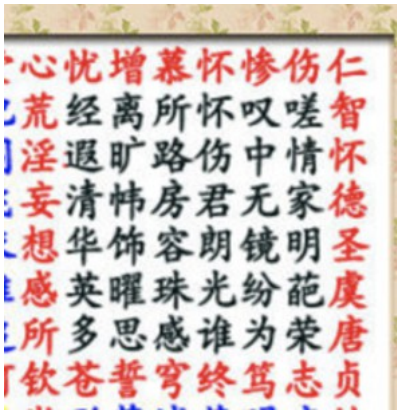

Poem I – A clockwise reading of the words in the red square located in the upper right corner of the poem:

仁智怀德圣虞唐，贞志笃终穹誓苍。钦所感想妄淫荒，心忧增慕怀惨伤。

rén zhì huái dé shèng yú táng 仁智怀德圣虞唐， zhēn zhì dǔ zhōng qióng shì cāng 贞志笃终穹誓苍。 qīn suǒ gǎn xiǎng wàng yín huāng 钦所感想妄淫荒， xīn yōu zēng mù huái cǎn shāng 心忧增慕怀惨伤。	-If the intellectuals possess great virtues, then the empire shall prosper like the ancient Yu and Tang, -The fidelity to ambition and the perseverance shall triumph, to the sky I pledge my will. -By the Emperor's intention, you should never take on a licentious lifestyle, -Despite the worries, my affection for you heightens, my heart, nevertheless, is saddened. [14]

Poem II – An anticlockwise reading of the words in the red square located in the upper right corner of the poem:

14 The translation of all texts is mine unless otherwise stated.

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伤惨怀慕增忧心，荒淫妄想感所钦。苍誓穹终笃志贞，唐虞圣德怀智仁。

Shāng cǎn huái mù zēng yōu xīn 伤惨怀慕增忧心， huāng yín wàng xiǎng gǎn suǒ qīn 荒淫妄想感所钦。 Cāng shì qióng zhōng dǔ zhì zhēn 苍誓穹终笃志贞， táng yú 20heng dé huái zhì rén 唐虞圣德怀智仁。	-Though having been considerably hurt, I keep harbouring love towards you, yet this makes me more worrisome, -My wishful, delusional thinking intends to appeal to whom I value dearly. -Our old promise, vowed to the eternity of sky; we should stick to that will and determination, -Just like Tang and Yu, who possess morality and intellect.

word-for-word gloss based on Poem I:

仁	智	怀	德	圣	虞	唐
benevolence	intellect	breast/harbour (v.)	virtue	holy/prosper	Yu	Tang

贞	志	笃	终	穹	誓	苍
loyal	ambition	persevere	end	sky	pledge	the common people/old

钦	所	感	想	妄	淫	荒
by the emperor/respect	place/structural particle	feel	think	random/ delusion	licentious	absurd

心	忧	增	慕	怀	惨	伤
heart	worry	increase	admiration	breast/harbou	tragic	injury

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				r (v.)		

The following features of the poems and translations should be noted:

1. 虞 and 唐 are the shortened forms for Yu Shun 虞舜 and Tang Yao 唐尧 from the prehistoric antiquity of China. In Chinese historiography, Yu and Tang are hailed as the tribal leaders who inaugurated the first Golden Era.
2. 钦 can be used both as a honorific term referencing the imperial emperor and a verb designating “to respect, to value dearly”.
3. 所 is employed here as an auxiliary word indicating passive voice. In this usage, it must precede a verb as its complement, to formulate a noun phrase. In the current case, when“所” is joined by “感想” (thought/sentiment), together the phrase means “the thoughts/ideas held by someone”.

From the preceding critical examination of the visual tradition in the Chinese classical poetry, it’s fair to claim that the Chinese visual poetry prefigures a set of formal resources that Western concrete poets would pick up (or reinvent) millennia later. In other words, the formal tools adopted by the modernist concrete poets were all there in early Chinese texts, such as the lack of punctuation, syntactic flexibility, non-linear reading and holistic thinking. Following this logic, the modernity of Western Concrete Poetry lies in the fact that it needs to break with the past by renouncing its own traditions and adopting the formal techniques of an alien ancient tradition, in which case being the Chinese ideogrammic poetics as well as compositional method. The Chinese Concrete Poetry on the other hand, continues its own minority tradition – given that it cannot break with its own tradition, except for certain aspects of the mainstream tradition. Therefore, for the Chinese concrete poets, what they did was mainly simply keeping a continuity with a minority literary tradition. However, in order to be branded as “modern/postmodern”, the age-old Chinese Concrete Poetry would have to travel to the West and then to Asia, via Japan and Taiwan and finally to be reimported into mainland China. It is in this way that the Chinese experimental poets who picked up on Concrete Poetry could look at the familiar with defamiliarized eyes.

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Earlier Chinese classical visual poetry is imbued with a desire to establish a poetic continuum – a heterogenous one, if you will, given their substantial formal variance in comparison with modern manifestations (consider Seiichi's repetitively grid-like *kanji* poems). Bringing the classical poetic experimentations into discussion demonstrates that the modern practice of Concrete Poetry forms part of a historical process rather than a break with the previous discourse. Situating these ancient visual poems in historical moments sheds light on the particular aesthetic and ideological questions posed and answers given. It is by keeping the classical visual poetry in view that this paper proposes to reconstruct the vision that construes modern Chinese Concrete Poetry as a historical culture, a poetic "continuity"[15] of the Chinese classical visual poem.

The Chinese classical visual poems provide a relevant frame of reference for the overlap of word and image. The Chinese writing system is a form of visual art in and of itself. The language is predisposed to be seen favourably as gestural symbols or pictorial signs. Yet curiously, the ideographic nature of the Chinese language has not prompted the writing of visual poetry as readily as might be expected. It seems that the Chinese ideogram both craves and resists an appeal to the iconic simultaneously. It is observable that even in the "A View from the Riverside Balustrade" (poem discussed in the previous chapter) where the graphemes are explicitly referenced to evince lyrical subjectivity, the material malleability assigned to the ideogram remains to be taken at face value (in comparison with the deconstructive treatment of the ideogram in, say, "rain" by Seiichi). The result is that the overall pattern evades the iconic evocation created by the particular usage of the component strokes. We may interpret this observation as an indicator that points to the particular Chinese perceptual mechanism, which is premised on the stable nexus of graphemic appearance and semantics in the written material. It would be rash to chalk it up to an antithesis in aesthetic paradigm between the East and the West. For the moment, it is enough to recognize that the way

15 The word continuity is placed in quotation marks for the attention I'd like to draw in relation to the contradictory stance inevitably evoked between the continuation of the visual tradition and the imported "modernity" accorded to the modern phase of the tradition. As I have argued in the last chapter, for the Chinese poets wanting to break with tradition, repurposing a pre-existing minority literary mode did not carry the same weight. The title of modernity was acknowledged only when ancient Chinese poetic practices were repackaged in the West as modern could Chinese poets then draw upon their own tradition and claim it as new.

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the Chinese visual poets visualize verses in their poems reflects and influences the ways in which culturally embedded readers appreciate and evaluate visual poems. At any rate, it embodies a holistic view of the harmonious relation between the nature of the cosmos and human beings – a philosophical legacy typical of Chinese culture. This perspective is easily identifiable in the discourse of visual poetry, where the lexical integrity was placed with emphasis. This means that the material base of the Chinese classical visual poetry mainly consists of interactions among concepts contained in the morphemes rather than in the structural reorganization of those dissembled concepts.[16] The relatively close relationship between verse and picture speaks to the Chinese aesthetic instinct that predominantly appeals to the harmonious disposition and the fidelity to the natural world, which is alien to the Western mode of artistic vision.

Considerations on the Modern Chinese Concrete Poetry

The previous section concerning the Chinese classical visual poetry places in relief the national origin that laid the Chinese aesthetic foundation on which the genre of visual poetry developed. This critical approach offers hints to the understanding the modern practice of Chinese Concrete Poetry as continuities within the overarching discourse of Chinese visual poetry. There has been revival of Chinese contemporary Concrete Poetry in recent years, which constitutes a notable trend in bringing new sensibilities and in responding to pertinent questions related to the present society and our mundane concerns. Modern life, as conceptually laid bare by the contemporary poet Bei Dao (b.1949) in this laconic poem, is but a net (网), nevertheless a pithy characterization that holds true for many.

网

“Life” (《生活》)[17]

16 Descriptive accounts of the “holistic” nature of the Mandarin language veers into the domain of general linguistics, a line of investigation referred to as “characterology” by linguists of the Prague School. Admittedly, there is no space and neither is it my intention to address this question in the current paper. Any tentative conclusion should be supported by contemporary linguistic studies pursuing this line of enquiry. This topic is mentioned here as a possible avenue for further research.

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Nowadays, Chinese concrete poems have largely expanded beyond academic discourse; they have found a mass audience by coalescing with new materials and extending into different realms such as cyberspace, exhibition halls, advertising and business brochures. This interest in art fusion is brought home in this thought-provoking installation, where the Chinese classical poetry serves the binding material between old and new, past and present.

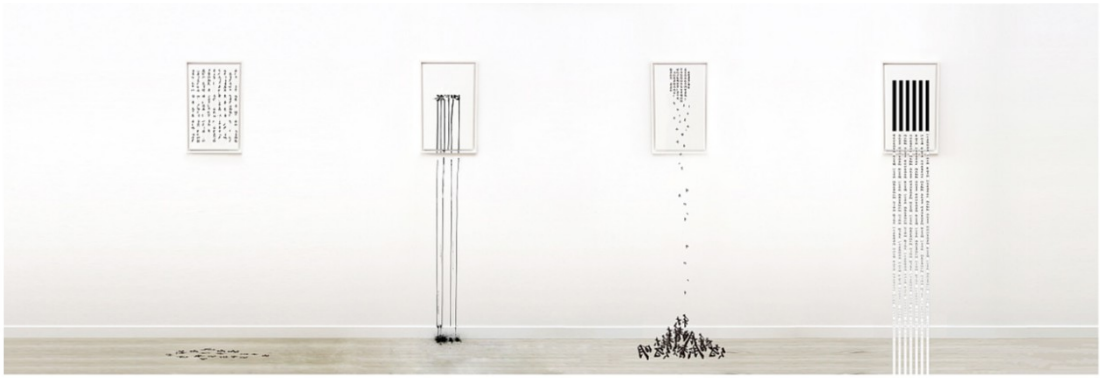

Figure 4: Art installation on “the elapsed time”; Visual material taken from classical poems thematically revolving around “time”.[18]

After decades of implementation of vernacular tongue, *baihua* (“plain speech”) poetry blossoms in each and every way. While the classical language, in spite of its vast trove and its international influence, slimmed significantly in its homeland, becoming an all-but-forgotten poetic voice in today’s poetry journal. However, envisioning the literati tradition as a memorial site is an equally girding approach. Chinese visual poetry, as part of that literati tradition, ultimately prevails over the established norms in language register and poetic composition; it continues to speak to

17 Bei Dao (pseudonym, literally means “north island”) is the foremost figure of the poetic genre Misty School. In reacting against the confined ideological and formal spectrum of modern free-verse poetry, a group of Chinese poets began in the late 1970s to experiment with a more hermetic, symbolic expression in their poems as a way to reckon with the disillusionment experienced during the Mao era. The misty poets were influenced by Western poets and modernist poetics, particularly the Imagism. Bei Dao also writes essays and short stories. He has been nominated several times of the Nobel Prize in Literature. The poem “life” comes from a suite of seven poems published collectively under the title “Journals in the City of Sun” (《太阳城札记》). Cf. Ian Hamilton Finlay’s one-word poems.

18 Image source: https://www.zcool.com.cn/work/ZMjgwNjczMjQ=.html

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the Chinese readers in essentially the same fashion. This justifies, at least partially, the lasting appeal of visual poetry in the Chinese cultural space.

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