



Intertwining

No dream is stranger than
this world that is all
I know.

—John Briscoe (44)

Occasionally we are given to consider what the human experiences of the world might have been like before the existence of all those things that have become so essential to our daily life and mutual well-being. Both the visual and the verbal aspects of our multicultural life together on this planet are givens. But what was life like before spoken words? Before written language? What was it like before pictures and paintings, images and illustrations? What was life like before there were computers? Yes, there was paper and pen, and before that skins of animals and scrolls made of leaves, and even before that there was the earth itself: upon all of these, signs and indications were drawn and written in order to convey information and ideas.

The earliest known forms of human communication were visual images; drawings dating back over 73,000 years can still be seen on rocks at Plombos cave in South Africa (Sample). Evidence of written language does not go back that far, but China boasts an imaginative story of the first conjunction of form and word. It identifies a man named Cangjie as the originator of written language, about 5000 years ago during the rule of the Yellow Emperor. Legend tells us that Cangjie, based on his own careful analysis of the forms of objects, produced symbols that resembled and represented them, thereby initiating the creation of Chinese characters. This understanding has endured. The idea that characters reflect the experienced world undergirds the education of Chinese children even today; it teaches them to think visually and to consider relationships—object/action, work/idea, thought/memory—as the way to grow in understanding their experience of the world (Li Jian).

John Briscoe explores this intertwining in his contemporary poetic work *The Lost Poems of Cangjie*. He gives imaginative form to the psychological impacts of the very beginnings of Chinese written language by creating “what the oldest known poetry on Earth might be like” (Briscoe letter). As words and then script became essential to humans as ways to communicate, written language began to evolve as a means to give permanent expression to deep human experience. It became valued that with words and sentences one could express and share the perceived and personal realities of objects, events, and mental/emotional/physical activities. Briscoe puts the interplay of dream and world at the core of his writing, building on the power of the legend of Cangjie that is evidence of an early understanding of the profundity of poetics.

We might therefore look closely at the Chinese character for the word *poetry*. According to Edward Chang, the Chinese character combines two words: “feelings in the heart” and “words or speech.” He concludes that “the function of poetry was to convey in words how one felt” (Chang 4). Perhaps *feelings in the heart*, and *dream*, as referenced by Briscoe, really come from the same place. They refer to ways of encountering and responding to the realities and mysteries of the world we are given to inhabit. The poet—then and now—gives attention to these encounters so that readers and hearers might know words for their own experiences of them.

The Chinese artist Zhang Yan Li grew up in an educational system that expected its students to memorize poems from the great literary past of ancient China. Such discipline not only helps to ensure the preservation of cultural artistic roots of the past, but it also serves to shape the use of language, perception of the world, identification of the value of human relationship, and development of values. For Yan Li, the memorization of poetry was paralleled by the personal expression she realized in the drawing she started doing early on in her childhood.

When I presented to Zhang Yan Li the idea of combining art and poetry for an exhibition at our gallery, it immediately captured her imagination. Her energy level rose as she considered the intertwining of her educational



Photography by Zheng Mei

There are Chinese traditions for the visual presentations that Zhang Yan Li employs in her generation of the images of the twenty two poets.

roots and love of poetry with her artistic skills. She embraced its possibilities, and we began our discussion of how the exhibit might be shaped, quite quickly arriving at the decision to bring together twenty two portraits of poets along with one poem of each.

Several parameters were considered in choosing the poets. We wanted a variety of the types of poems written from the earliest years of language development up until the 12th Century. We understood the need for accessing their poems in good English translations. And we each had our own favorite poems and poets, choices that occasionally superseded the good English translation criterion. We persevered, however, and found ways around our own communication challenges and translation inaccuracies. Our collaborative efforts resulted in poems that embody the heritage we were after and poems that epitomize their work.

There are Chinese traditions for the visual presentations that Yan Li employs in her generation of the images of the twenty two poets. The linear flow of the figures renders each poet in a dynamic state, although at the same time they seem quite still. The garments become expressive, appearing to move with the breeze as in a dream. Each one's gestures can be understood as a reference to the individual nature, personality, and emotion of the poet. The delightful play of color throughout enlivens the whole and is evidence of the artist's appreciation for the content of the character as felt in the poetic verse.

This is a significant time for us to accomplish this project. At the beginning stages of our discussion, when COVID-19 had closed her school and thereby given her time to paint, Yan Li asked if such an endeavor was a good idea, given the fact that the coronavirus had its origin in China: Would people object? I responded that I thought it was very propitious timing. For me, it offered the important opportunity to hold up examples of China's great poetic heritage so that we in the USA would know that there are additional things still available for us to focus on during our shared pandemic; such things include the poetry, the poets, and the artist herself—things that broaden our perspectives and deepen our understandings.

Intertwining is meant to give reference to the multi-dimensional nature of this creative effort by Zhang Yan Li. Many strands come together: the poet and the poetic traditions; the poems with their unique and defined styles from the past; their place in the education of a people; the impact of words as they define and shape our ways of thinking and seeing today; the cultural insights afforded us as we affirm a significant part of world history; the inter-connectedness of an artist from China and a curator from the USA joined in an international intercultural effort.

This exhibition is also created as a viewer/creator interaction. It entrusts viewers with a double inquiry: the reading of a poem and the looking at an image of each of the poets. The two part encounter is meant to be dynamic rather than static, and to serve as a springboard for further thought and investigation. To this end, in our ArtReach Arts Library are books where you can read additional poems by each of the poets and discover more about the literary history that is such a rich part of Chinese culture. In this way, you the viewer are invited to participate in the intended intertwinings.

—W. Sheldon Hurst, Curator

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