

LETTER FROM CHINA

ORACLE BONES

A wandering poet, a mysterious suicide, and a battle over an alphabet.

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FEBRUARY 16, 2004

THE BOOK

In the library of the Anyang Archeological Work Station, the title of a book caught my eye: “Our Country’s Shang and Zhou Bronzes Looted by American Imperialists.” I had travelled to Anyang, a small city in the northern Chinese province of Henan, to study the local antiquities. According to conventional history, this region was the capital of the Shang dynasty, which flourished for nearly six centuries before being conquered by the Zhou, around 1045 B.C. Traditionally, the Shang’s downfall has been attributed to dissolute behavior—legends depict the last emperor as a drunk who filled swimming pools with wine. But this was the first hint I’d seen of any American involvement, and I took a closer look.

No author’s name was listed. The book, published in 1962, contained more than eight hundred photographs of Shang and Zhou bronze vessels (the Shang is one of the most distinctive periods of ancient Chinese metallurgy). For each vessel, the book listed an imperialist collector. The catalogue included Doris Duke (she had apparently looted nine bronzes), Avery C. Brundage (thirty vessels), and Alfred F. Pillsbury (fifty-eight).

A young Chinese archeologist was working in the library, and I asked if he knew who had written the book. “Chen Mengja,” the archeologist said. “His specialty was oracle bones. He was quite a famous poet, too.”

Oracle bones are inscribed with the earliest known writing in East Asia. The bones—cattle scapulae and turtle plastrons—were used in divination ceremonies at the Shang royal court. I asked the archeologist if Chen Mengja was still in China.

“He’s dead,” the young man said. “He killed himself during the Cultural Revolution.”

I closed the book and asked if there was anybody left at Anyang who had known Chen.

“Talk to Old Yang,” the archeologist said. “He was in Beijing with Chen when he killed himself. You can find Old Yang just across the courtyard.”

There were only a few people working full time at the Anyang station, which consisted of nearly a dozen concrete buildings surrounded by cornfields. Many of the structures had been built solely to house artifacts. Wind rustled through the parasol trees, and occasionally a train moaned in the distance as it rolled toward Beijing, six hours away. Otherwise, the complex was silent. It had high concrete walls topped by barbed wire.

I met Old Yang—Yang Xizhang—in a dusty conference room. He was sixty-six years old, and his teeth had been extravagantly silvered; they startled me every time he smiled, like the glint of an unexpected relic. Old Yang told me that Chen Mengjia had catalogued the bronzes in the nineteen-forties. Chen was living in the United States then, with his wife, Zhao Luorui, who was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. She had grown up in a Western-influenced Chinese family; her father, an Anglican minister, was the dean of the school of religion at Yenching University, in Beijing.

“That’s one reason Chen had trouble,” Old Yang said. “Her family was closely connected to foreign things. When the Cultural Revolution started, Chen Mengjia was labelled a Capitalist Intellectual. But he was especially criticized because of his Male-Female-Relationship Life Style.”

The phrase was new to me, and I asked what it meant. Old Yang glanced away with an uncomfortable smile—a flash of silver. “It means this,” he said finally. “You have a relationship with a woman who’s not your wife.”

“So Chen did this?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Old Yang said. For a moment, he gazed silently out the window behind me. I asked about Chen’s suicide, and Old Yang continued, “It happened in 1966, just as the Cultural Revolution started. When Chen first tried to kill himself, people saved him. After that, the Institute of Archeology sent me and some other young archeologists to watch him. But we couldn’t be with him twenty-four hours a day.”

To illustrate, Old Yang pointed to the window. It was a sunny afternoon; light streaked unevenly through the trees that stood outside. “Imagine that you’re in Chen’s Beijing home, looking out to the courtyard,” Old Yang said. “One day, Chen walked outside, past the window.” Old Yang made a sweeping gesture, as if following the trail of an imaginary figure moving beyond the range of our vision. “After a few minutes, we realized he was gone. We rushed outside, but it was too late—he had hanged himself.”

Old Yang said that Chen’s wife wasn’t there, because Red Guards had been holding her across town, at Peking University. I asked why the book about American imperialists didn’t bear Chen’s name.

“In 1957, Chen had criticized some of the leaders’ ideas,” Old Yang said, “and for that he was labelled a Rightist. Rightists weren’t allowed to publish. But that book was very important, so they published it without his name.” In his office, Old Yang found a faded Institute of Archeology yearbook and opened to a page of photographs, including one of Chen as a middle-aged man. He had dimples and bright eyes and a shock of jet-black hair, and wore a traditional high-collared shirt. He had the biggest smile of anybody on the page.

Months later, in Beijing, I tracked down another scholar, in his eighties, who told me that there was much more to the story. In the nineteen-fifties, Mao Zedong had proposed replacing the Chinese writing system with an alphabet, and Chen Mengjia opposed the plan. His first major political mistake was a defense of Chinese characters.

THE BONE

In the history of human civilization, written Chinese is unique: a script whose fundamental structural principles haven’t changed since the days of the Shang. Like Egyptian hieroglyphics, written Chinese evolved from a pictographic script (each character representing a thing or an idea) to a logographic one (each character representing a spoken syllable). During the second millennium B.C., Semitic tribes in the Near East converted Egyptian hieroglyphics into the first alphabet. Alphabetic writing systems are more flexible than logographic ones, because an alphabet allows a single syllable to be broken down into even smaller parts. This makes it easier to apply the writing system to different languages and even dialects; for example, a writer in English can distinguish between a proper “what” and a Cockney “wot.”

Chinese is the only ancient logographic system that was never abandoned or converted to an alphabet. As a result, there has always been a great gap between the way people write and the ways they speak. For most of China’s history, official writing used classical Chinese, a language that existed only in written form and that had been developed during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.). Then, in the early twentieth century, reformers successfully campaigned to have official writing follow the northern vernacular known as Mandarin.

Spoken Chinese is not really a single language—linguists sometimes compare its diversity to that of the major Romance tongues. One philologist told me that the “dialects” spoken in Beijing and Canton are in fact languages as distinct as English and German. If China used an alphabetic script, texts would reflect these differences, but under the logographic system many spoken languages cannot be written. For a native of the southeastern province of Zhejiang to become literate, for example, he must first learn to speak Mandarin. Most southern Chinese write in what is essentially a second tongue.

The script is technically difficult—for moderate literacy, one needs to memorize about four thousand characters. Though the characters originally contained clear visual clues to their pronunciation, many of these were rendered obsolete by changes in speech, making them even harder to remember. Despite this complexity, the Chinese have always been inspired to learn them. Much of Chinese culture revolves around writing—calligraphy is one of the most valued arts, and paintings often incorporate prominent inscriptions. During some periods, communities erected special furnaces in order to provide a proper cremation for any scrap of paper that had been dignified by writing. By the seventeenth century, China had a well-established commercial press, and literacy seems to have ranged more widely across class groups than it did in many parts of Europe. Evelyn S. Rawski, a historian at the University of Pittsburgh, has estimated basic literacy rates for Chinese males in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries at between thirty and forty-five per cent—comparable to those for males in pre-industrial Japan and England.

The writing system has had other virtues, including a unique ability to transcend time and space. Regardless of where a literate Chinese comes from, he can read anything written by another Chinese. And he is never too far removed from the writing of ancient times. When the oracle bones were rediscovered, at the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars were able to begin deciphering them immediately—a marked contrast with Egyptian hieroglyphics, which were unintelligible for centuries, until the excavation of the Rosetta stone.

Two years ago, I travelled to the University of California at Berkeley to visit David N. Keightley, one of the most respected oracle-bone scholars. (There are probably no more than thirty specialists worldwide.) Keightley told me that he has always been fascinated by connections between writing and Chinese ancestor worship—a practice that has been a centerpiece of Chinese culture for thousands of years.

The Shang royal court regularly held divination ceremonies, calling upon ancestors to provide information or assistance. During the ritual, a specially treated scapula or plastron was subjected to intense heat until it cracked—a physical transformation that was interpreted as the voice of the dead. Engravers then inscribed the subject of the divination into the bone.

Excavated bones reveal that the Shang inquired about everything from warfare to childbirth, from weather to illness. They asked about the meaning of dreams. They negotiated with the dead: on one bone, an inscription proposes sacrificing three human prisoners to an ancestor, and then, presumably after an unsatisfactory crack, the next inscription offers up five prisoners. Sometimes the Shang sacrificed hundreds of people at once.

Keightley showed me a rubbing of an oracle-bone divination about a royal toothache. The plastron had been inscribed during the reign of Wu Ding, a Shang king who ruled from roughly 1200 to 1189 B.C. The King, believing that a dissatisfied ancestor was responsible for his bad tooth, was trying to discover the spirit's identity in order to prepare an appropriate sacrifice. Four names had been listed on the bone: Father Jia, Father Geng, Father Xin, Father Yi. "You have the King's dead father and three dead uncles," Keightley said. For each ancestor, multiple divinations had been performed. "And then we have another inscription: 'Offer a dog to Father Geng and split open a sheep.' That's why I think it was Father Geng who was causing the illness." Keightley paused and looked up. "Those are the notes," he said. "We have to supply the music ourselves."

THE LETTER

In the years that followed my discovery of the book in Anyang, I sought out people who had known Chen Mengjia. Sometimes I was too late; I tried to get in touch with one close friend of his and was told that he was on his deathbed. Even when I was successful, the story of Chen seemed to change with every telling. A ninety-nine-year-old archeologist in Taiwan said he had heard a rumor that the Communists had killed Chen. On the mainland, everybody said that his death was a suicide: some mentioned the love affair; others denied it. One man told me that Chen had been involved with a movie starlet. Somebody else said that she was a Peking-opera actress. Chen's brother-in-law, Zhao Jingxun, still lives in Beijing, and he told me that Chen had tried to kill himself three times. "My sister saved him twice," Zhao said. "The third time, she had fallen asleep from exhaustion. She didn't find him until he was dead." Zhao, who was eighty-three, dismissed the rumor of an affair with a wave of his hand. "I never heard about that," he said.

The relics of Chen's life are few: some photographs, a handful of letters. The Shanghai Museum has devoted a small room to his collection of Ming-dynasty furniture, which includes some beautiful pieces that are more than four hundred years old. One side chair, carved from rare yellow rosewood, is decorated with the character *shou*, or "longevity." Ma Chengyuan, a retired curator at the museum, was a close friend of Chen's. Ma told me that they had last met in 1963, when Chen gave Ma a copy of "Our Country's Shang and Zhou Bronzes Looted by American Imperialists." Ma said with a grin, "You have to understand that that title wasn't Chen's choice."

The Shanghai Museum bought the furniture from Zhao Jingxun in 2000, after Chen's widow died. (She and Chen had no children.) Ma, who is eighty-five, gave me a copy of a letter that Chen wrote in 1966, the year he died, offering to donate his furniture. The calligraphy was beautiful; one sentence read, "That yellow rosewood chair, it might be early Ming dynasty, and of course it should be donated to the Shanghai Museum." I asked Ma if the donation might have been made out

of fear that the pieces would be damaged in a political movement. “In 1963, he told me that he was concerned about their protection,” Ma said. “But he never specifically mentioned political problems. We can only guess.”

I searched for other artifacts that might help me piece together a record of Chen’s life. No full-length biography has been published, and there are no detailed accounts of the events leading to his death. In China, the Cultural Revolution is still a shadowy period; it’s permissible to write critically about those years, but there is a tacit understanding that investigations should not be pushed too far. And, because of the political dangers, few people kept diaries or saved letters.

Chen’s early years are easier to follow, since he published so precociously. He was born in 1911 in the eastern city of Nanjing, where his father was a schoolteacher and a Presbyterian minister. Ten Chen siblings—five girls, five boys—lived to adulthood, and all of them graduated from college. Chen Mengjia, the seventh child, was the most brilliant. He had published his first poem as a teenager; by twenty, when his *début* volume appeared, he was famous. As Chinese poets have traditionally done, he gave himself a pen name: Wanderer. He became the youngest member of the Crescent Moon Society, a group of romantic poets who eschewed the rigid rules of classical Chinese verse.

Chen’s poetic style was simple and well metered; critics compared him to Housman and Hardy. He abandoned Christianity after childhood, but he had an almost religious feeling toward the distant past. In one early poem, the narrator gazes at a thousand-year-old stone engraving of a woman’s face and notices “a cold, silent trace of a smile.” In 1932, Chen entered graduate school at Yenching University, where he first studied religion, then ancient Chinese writing. The past drew closer; poetry drifted away. In “Song of Myself,” Chen described the pain of creativity: “I crushed my chest and pulled out a string of songs.” Later, he wrote, “Since I was seventeen, I have used metre to control myself. Everything I wrote could be measured by a string. . . . The chain was heavy on me, and in the slavery I learned to make fine words.” By his early thirties, he had essentially stopped writing verse. He spent most of his time studying the inscriptions on ancient bronzes and oracle bones.

His wife, Zhao Luorui, was another prodigy. At twenty-five, she published the first Chinese translation of “The Waste Land.” When the Japanese invaded Nanjing, in 1937, Chen and Zhao, along with many other Chinese academics, moved to the southwestern province of Yunnan. In 1944, they received a joint humanities fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation, which paid for their journey to the United States. At the University of Chicago, Zhao wrote a dissertation about Henry James, while Chen hunted Chinese bronzes. The Wanderer earned his name, visiting museums and private collections in Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, New York, Boston, San Francisco, Honolulu, Toronto, Paris,

London, and Oxford, among other cities. After visiting Stockholm, in 1947, Chen wrote a letter to the Rockefeller Foundation: “I was received by the Crown Prince in his castle to see his own collection and had the honour of talking and discussing with him for two hours.”

Many ancient bronzes had been removed from China, especially during the chaotic early decades of the twentieth century, and few had been studied carefully. Chen planned to write a definitive book on the subject, complete with photographs and typology analysis. In 1947, he returned to China, having sent Harvard a draft of a huge manuscript. Editing would be conducted by mail. But the Communists came to power in 1949, and the Korean War started in 1950; communication ended between China and the United States.

Elinor Pearlstein, a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, has in recent years tracked down Chen’s letters from his time in the United States. Pearlstein provided me with information about Chen’s travels, but she said that the Harvard draft of the book had disappeared. Apparently, the manuscript was given to a Harvard graduate student for editing, but the student committed suicide in 1967. The book was never published in the United States. (The Chinese volume I’d seen, with the anti-American title, was a poorly edited, pared-down version.)

In 1956, Chen published a groundbreaking book on oracle bones, “A Comprehensive Survey of the Divination Inscriptions from the Wastes of Yin.” He included chapters on Shang grammar, astronomy, sacrifices, warfare, geography, and other basic topics. Every scholar of ancient Chinese I met said that it is a masterpiece.

But Chen’s personality was often at odds with the politics of Communist China. “Chen had a poet’s sensibility,” Wang Shimin, an archeologist who was a friend of Chen’s, told me. “He always said what he thought. He was *xinzhi koukuai*—he had a straight heart and a quick mouth.”

MAO'S ALPHABET

During the decades after the Opium War (1839-42), as China was occupied by foreign powers, its literary culture failed to prepare it for the transformation of modernity. In nineteenth-century Europe, archeology was dominated by the rising middle class, whose faith in change and material progress was reflected in descriptions of ancient ages—from stone to bronze and then to iron. But the Chinese interest in antiquity revolved around the written word, and traditional histories emphasized continuity rather than change. The Chinese were stuck with being Chinese.

Everything that was continuous—Confucianism, the imperial system, the characters—seemed outdated. All at once, the Chinese seemed to realize that they

were writing differently from every other civilization on earth. In the nineteenthens, Qian Xuantong, a prominent philologist, proposed that China should switch, in both spoken and written language, to Esperanto. Many of the twentieth century's leading scholars advocated abandoning the characters, believing them to be an impediment to both literacy and democracy. Lu Xun, who lived from 1881 to 1936, and was perhaps China's greatest modern author, advocated a shift to the Latin alphabet, which would enable people to write in their native tongues. He wrote (in characters, as he did until his death), "If we are to go on living, Chinese characters cannot. . . . The characters are a precious legacy handed down by our ancestors, I know. But we can sacrifice our inheritance or ourselves: which is it to be?"

In 1936, as the Communists were gaining power, Mao Zedong told an American journalist that alphabetization was inevitable. When Mao finally took control of China, in 1949, many expected the government to replace characters with Latin letters, as Vietnam had done earlier in the century. But in the summer of 1950 Mao handed down a surprise decision, calling for linguists to develop a "national-in-form" alphabet—a new writing system, whose letters would be distinctively Chinese.

John DeFrancis, a linguist at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, has studied this period, and he told me that the inspiration for Mao's order has always been a mystery. DeFrancis recommended that I speak with Zhou Youguang, a ninety-seven-year-old linguist who had worked on the writing-reform committee. DeFrancis, who is ninety-two, had not met with Zhou since the nineteen-eighties. "He said that he knew why Mao made that decision, but he wasn't free to talk about it," DeFrancis told me. He thought that perhaps Zhou's advanced age would make him more disposed to speak openly.

Zhou, along with two other surviving advocates for Chinese writing reform, lived in the first entryway of the dormitory at the State Language Commission, in Beijing. One afternoon, I started on the ground floor, with Yin Binyong, a friendly man of seventy-two who had the bushy eyebrows of a Taoist god. Yin told me that, after Mao's request for a national-in-form alphabet, the committee considered more than two thousand proposed writing systems. Some were derived entirely from Chinese; others used Latin or Cyrillic alphabets; a few combined fragments of Chinese characters with foreign letters. There were Chinese alphabets in Arabic. Yin remembered one system that employed numbers to convey Chinese sounds. In 1955, the committee narrowed the field to six alphabetic finalists: Latin, Cyrillic, and four completely new "Chinese" systems.

The story continued on the dormitory's fourth floor, where I visited eighty-year-old Wang Jun, who told me about character simplification. In 1956, Mao and other leaders concluded that the Chinese alphabets weren't yet usable. They sanctioned

the Latin scheme, known as Pinyin, for use in early education and other special purposes, but not as a replacement script. And they decided to simplify a number of Chinese characters. This was described as an “initial reform stage”: Mao, it seems, wanted more time to consider the options.

But writing reform soon became entangled in politics. In April of 1957, the Communist Party launched the Hundred Flowers campaign, during which intellectuals were invited to speak their minds, however critical. The response was overwhelming; thousands of Chinese commented publicly on all sorts of topics. Until then, Chen Mengjia had not been active in the writing-reform movement, but now he stepped in as a vigorous opponent of alphabetization and character simplification. His words were everywhere in the popular press that spring. In an article for the *Guangming Daily*, he wrote, “There must be objective reasons why we are still using these characters after more than three thousand years.” In a published speech, he declared, “In the past, foreign devils said that the Chinese language was bad. Now more open scholars from the capitalist countries don’t say so anymore. . . . I predict that we will still be using these characters for a number of years, and we should treat them as if they were alive. They are our cultural inheritance.”

Then, after only five weeks, Mao abruptly terminated the Hundred Flowers campaign. By the end of the year, more than three hundred thousand intellectuals had been labelled Rightists. In the press, angry headlines appeared: “CRITICIZE CHEN MENGJIA”; “REFUTE THE RIGHTIST ELEMENT CHEN MENGJIA’S ABSURD THEORY.” One article proclaimed, “The Rightist Element Chen Mengjia, a blade of grass that is poisonous . . . should never be allowed to root deep.” Another described him as a “cow demon” with an “evil scheme”: “Why do counter-revolutionaries of all eras hate simplified characters? Do they really want to return to antiquity?”

And from Chen—silence. He was sent to Henan province, the cradle of the Shang culture, to be reformed through manual labor. For the next five years, he was not allowed to publish anything under his own name.

It was dark by the time I arrived on the third floor of the State Language Commission dormitory. There I met Zhou Youguang, a frail, stooped man in slippers and sweatpants. I had to lean close and shout while he cupped a hand around his hearing aid. But his mind was sharp, and he still remembered some English; in the nineteen-forties, he had been a banker in New York. “I used to read your magazine in the Bankers’ Club,” he said with a laugh.

I yelled at him, “It’s changed since then!”

Like many patriotic young Chinese who had been living abroad, Zhou returned to China after the founding of the People's Republic. Sensing that there wasn't much of a future in Communist banking, Zhou switched to linguistics, a longtime hobby, and he became the main architect of Pinyin.

I asked Zhou what had happened to the four Chinese alphabets, and he told me that all records had apparently been destroyed. "It was easy to lose things like that during the Cultural Revolution," he said.

The Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, represents the climax of China's disillusionment with its traditions. But, ironically, the upheaval helped protect the characters. When the chaos finally ended, the Chinese no longer had an appetite for radical cultural change, and both the public and the government rejected further attempts at writing reform. Today, almost nobody advocates alphabetization, and Zhou predicts that China won't give up its characters for at least another century, if ever. Even the simplification didn't get very far. It reduced the number of brushstrokes that make up some of the most commonly used characters, but the principles of the writing system remain the same. Essentially, it's the equivalent of converting an English word like "through" to "thru." Zhou and others believe that simplification hasn't had a significant effect on improving literacy rates. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and many overseas Chinese communities don't use the simplified characters, and traditionalists despise them.

In hindsight, Mao's 1950 command doomed writing reform; without the search for a national-in-form alphabet, China likely would have adopted a Latin script before the Cultural Revolution. When I asked about Mao, Zhou said that the turning point was the Chairman's first state visit to the Soviet Union, in 1949. "Mao asked Stalin for advice about writing reform," Zhou said. "Stalin told him, 'You're a great country, and you should have your own Chinese form of writing. You shouldn't simply use the Latin alphabet.' That's why Mao wanted a national-in-form alphabet."

Chen Mengjia's brave defense of tradition had been unnecessary. In a sense, Joseph Stalin had already saved Chinese characters. I yelled out Chen's name, and Zhou smiled. "I liked him a lot," Zhou said. "But, to be frank, his opposition had no impact on any of this."

THE MISPRINTED CHARACTER

Only one of Chen Mengjia's siblings is still alive—Chen Mengxiong, an eighty-five-year-old retired hydrogeologist. (In that generation of the Chen family, all the male given names included the character *meng*, or "dream.") On a wintry December morning, I called on Mengxiong at his apartment in Beijing; his wife, a white-haired woman with a tight smile, brought us cups of tea.

Mengxiong seemed reluctant to talk—he said he wasn't feeling well. We looked at his only surviving photograph of the Chen clan, and he told me that his brother, after being labelled a Rightist, spent two or three years doing agricultural labor in Henan. "He had always been outgoing, but when he returned he didn't talk much," Mengxiong said. He also mentioned that he had been upset when Zhao Jingxun, Mengjia's brother-in-law, accepted money from the Shanghai Museum for the antique furniture. "Mengjia wanted it to be donated, not sold," the old man said angrily. "I never talked to Zhao after that."

I had brought a copy of Mengjia's 1966 letter to the museum curator, and I handed it to Mengxiong. He read it silently. "I've never seen this before," he said. "Where did you get it?"

Chinese tend to speak circuitously when confronted with a painful memory, and their stories go slack like string falling into a pile. But when they do decide to talk their directness can be overpowering. "That August, the Red Guards started their campaign against old things," Mengxiong said. "I was being struggled against. My oldest son was about nine, and I told him to sneak over to Mengjia's home and warn him. Mengjia had so many old paintings and books and things; I told him to throw them out or hide them. My son returned and said that everything was fine.

"But that night was the first time Mengjia tried to kill himself. He took sleeping pills, but he didn't die. They took him to the hospital. The next day, I went to his home, and there were Big Character posters on the door, criticizing Mengjia. I entered, and the Red Guards were already there. 'Good,' they said. 'You walked straight into the net.'

"Mengjia's wife was there, too, and the Guards seated her and me on chairs in the courtyard. They shaved off half our hair—that was called the Yin-Yang Head. Then they took off their leather belts and started beating us. First, they used the leather, then the buckle. I was wearing a white shirt, and it turned entirely red with blood. Once they let me go, I telephoned my work unit, and they sent people to take me home. On the way back, I saw my wife—not the same wife you've met, but my wife at the time. I told her to hurry home.

"Mengjia was in the hospital for a while, but they expelled him because of his background. After about a week, he killed himself. They had a live-in maid, and I think she found him. I couldn't go to his home, because I was being struggled against. There wasn't any funeral."

Mengxiong paused. I thought the story was over, but then the old man spoke again: "My wife had problems that year. She had a bad class background—her father was a famous calligrapher who had been in the Kuomintang administration. She was so frightened by the anti-Rightist campaigns in the nineteen-fifties that

she became mentally ill. In 1966, not long after Mengjia died, her work unit asked her to copy revolutionary songs onto carbon paper. She wrote the lyrics ‘Ten thousand years to Chairman Mao, ten thousand, ten thousand.’ It was the same thing over and over. But she made a mistake on one word. She wrote *wu* instead of *wan*.”

Mengxiong paused to inscribe two characters in my notebook: *wan sui*—ten thousand years. Then he wrote his wife’s mistake: *wu sui*—no years. “She was immediately taken into custody,” he said. “For about five years, she was held in Hebei province. For some of that time, she was kept in a pigsty. After she came back, in the early nineteen-seventies, she was never the same. She died in 1982.”

THE WRITTEN WORLD

In the course of my research, I interviewed only one young person. I found a Chen Mengjia quotation on a Web site about Chinese writing; the site was edited by a thirty-five-year-old Hungarian named Imre Galambos, who is a curator at the British Library, in London. Galambos wrote his Ph.D. dissertation, at Berkeley, on Chinese-character development.

Traditionally, scholars have thought that characters were standardized during the reign of Qin Shihuang, who first unified the Chinese empire, in 221 B.C. But recently excavated documents suggest that Qin’s impact may have been exaggerated. Galambos told me that the most important literary unification actually seems to have happened later, when the Han came to power and produced the first Chinese dictionary and the first official history. In order to validate their own cultural lineage, Han intellectuals tied the earlier so-called dynasties—the Xia, the Shang, the Zhou, and the Qin—into a single narrative. In fact, these were almost certainly distinct ethnic groups, with their own cultures, their own spoken languages, and their own methods of political control. But, after the Shang, they all shared a single writing system, and Han historians used this script to create a coherent story from the chaotic details of history, memory, and imagination. Mark Edward Lewis, a historian at Stanford, has described the ancient, continuous Chinese empire as based upon “an imaginary realm created within texts.”

Galambos makes frequent visits to Beijing, and on one occasion when I met him he expanded on this theme. “There are certain cultures, like the Byzantine and the Chinese, in which the written documents create a world that is more significant than the real world,” he told me. “I think the literary world is the link in time that permits this thing we call ‘Chinese history.’ It’s not the number of people or anything like that; it’s the enormous written world that they produced. It’s so big that it eats them up and everybody around them.”

I asked Galambos what had inspired him to study Chinese. He replied that when he was a young man, in Communist Hungary, the mandatory military service was shortened by six months if you entered university. With this in mind, Galambos applied, but he missed all the deadlines except one—for a scholarship to study in China. That was fifteen years ago. “I got sucked into this whole Chineseness,” he said.

One night, we met for a drink beside Houhai, a lake in central Beijing. It was a beautiful autumn evening; the lights shone red and yellow on the water. Galambos talked about the importance of writing in China, and then he pointed at me. “That’s why the Chinese worry about you, the correspondent,” he said. “For the West, whatever you create is China. If you write about us sitting here in Houhai, people will think, Wow, China’s a really cool place. That’s how the place is formed in their minds. But it might have very little to do with reality.”

THE POEM

Chen Mengjia’s wife survived him by thirty-two years. After the Cultural Revolution—the criticisms, the beatings, the head-shaving—Zhao Luorui developed schizophrenia, but she recovered enough to teach and write again. In the nineteen-eighties, she translated the first complete Chinese edition of “Leaves of Grass.” In 1990, she returned to lecture at her alma mater, the University of Chicago; the following year, she received the university’s Distinguished Achievement Award. She died in 1998.

Not long ago, I met one of Zhao’s Chicago classmates, Wu Ningkun; he was eighty-three. In 1951, at Zhao’s invitation, Wu abandoned his Ph.D. dissertation on T. S. Eliot in order to return to China and teach. Wu was imprisoned in 1958, after being labelled a Rightist. For more than two decades, he lived either in jail or in exile in the countryside. He returned to the United States in 1990, eventually settling in Reston, Virginia, with his wife, Li Yikai. In 1993, he published, in English, a memoir about Communist China entitled “A Single Tear.”

When I visited Wu’s apartment, he recalled that, after his imprisonment, he didn’t see Zhao again until 1980. “We didn’t even mention Mengjia’s name,” Wu said softly. “That would have been one of the hardest things for me to say—if I had said I was sorry. I knew how futile and meaningless those words were. She didn’t cry. She was very strong-willed.”

Wu told me that during his years in prison he had often gained strength by remembering verse. “I used to think of Du Fu, Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas,” he said. “Do you know the one Dylan Thomas wrote when his father was dying? That line—‘twisting on racks.’ From ‘And Death Shall Have No Dominion.’ You know, I heard Dylan Thomas recite his poems in Chicago. It was very touching.”

I asked Wu if he had spoken with Thomas.

“No, I was just in the audience,” Wu said. “And he was more than half drunk. He was suffering—life was such a burden to him, I suppose.”

In the library of Peking University, a friend helped me find a two-volume Chinese version of “Leaves of Grass.” The title page prominently listed the translator’s name: Zhao Luorui.

The book had been published in 1991, and three years later Kenneth M. Price, an American Whitman scholar, visited Zhao in Beijing. Their conversation was published in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly*. In the interview, Price asked Zhao how she had translated the first stanza of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” in which a long sentence builds for twenty-two lines before the subject and verb appear—a structure that would be awkward in Chinese. Zhao answered, “There is no way of keeping the sentence together as one sentence because I must say that, though I want to be faithful, I also want my Chinese to be fluent.”

I reread Whitman’s original, then picked up the Chinese volume. Using a dictionary for the difficult characters, I did my best to bring Zhao’s last three lines back into English:

I, the singer of painful and joyous songs uniting this life
and the next,

Receiving all hints, making use of them all, but at full
speed leaping over everything,

Sing a reminiscence. ♦

Oracle bone script (Chinese: 甲骨文) was the form of Chinese characters used on oracle bones—animal bones or turtle plastrons used in pyromantic divination—in the late 2nd millennium BC, and is the earliest known form of Chinese writing. The vast majority, amounting to over 50,000 inscribed items, were found at the Yinxu site (in Xiaotun, near modern Anyang, Henan Province). They record pyromantic divinations of the last nine kings of the Shang dynasty, beginning with Wu Ding, whose accession is dated by Oracle bones from 3,500 years ago give evidence for the continuity of the Chinese written language. The analysis of the Oracle bones in the 1920s changed all that. Not only had China an advanced written language stretching back nearly four thousand years but the early historical records that had been considered largely “legendary” were shown to be surprisingly accurate. Pit of oracle bones at Anyang Yinxu. Oracle Bone Script (甲骨文). The oldest inscriptions that are recognised unequivocally as Chinese date from about 1200 BC and were found in Anyang, the capital of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BC) in 1895. The Oracle Bone Script was used between about about 1300 and 1100 BC according to some sources, and between 1500 and 1000 BC according to others. Some 400,000 fragments with inscriptions in the Oracle Bone Script have been found. Oracle Bones (also known as Dragon's Bones) were the shoulder blades of oxen or plastrons of turtles (the flat, underside of the turtle's shell) which were used in the Shang Dynasty of China (c. 1600-1046 BCE) for divination. A fortune-teller would carve (later, paint) symbols on the bones of the ox or the turtle shell, apply a hot poker or fire until the bone or shell cracked, and then interpret the direction of the crack through their drawing to predict the future.