



A “*Linnaea amabilis*” flowering tree in Toronto, photographed by Yan Zhou.

Linnaea amabilis, also called *Kolkwitzia*, and *Kolkwitzia amabilis*, commonly known as beauty bush; is originated in China, called 猬实, or 猬实. It had the name because its fruit resembles a hedgehog.

Terra incognita to Heterotopias

Plant Transmission and Cultural Exchange Between China and Europe

(16th–Early 19th Century)

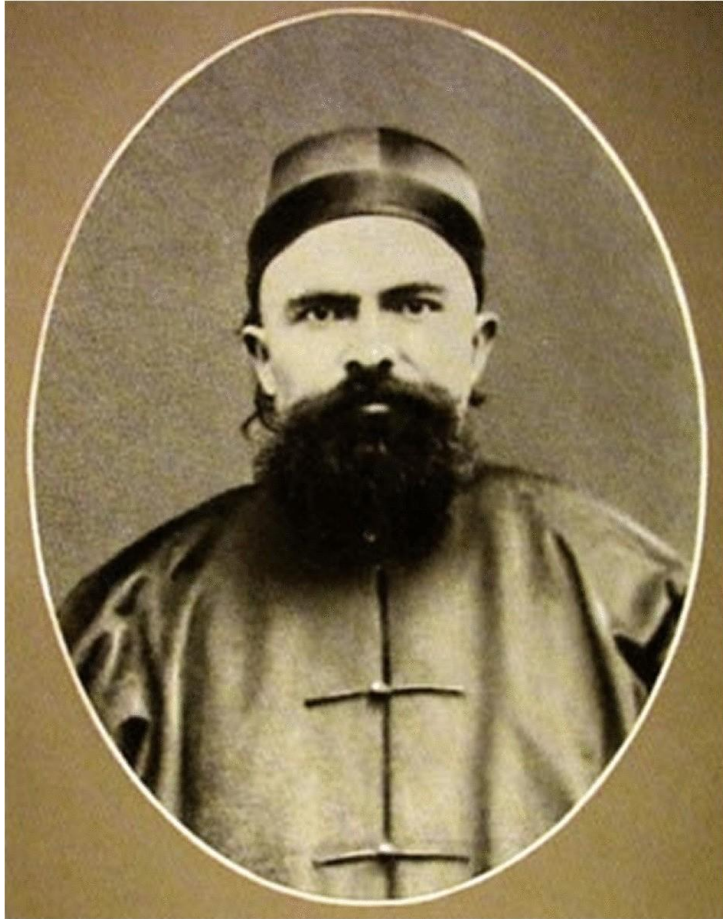
Exophony Symposium

organized by Soheila Esfahani and Behnaz Fatemi Jahmani

Presented by Yan Zhou

April 23, 2026

The Department of Visual Arts, Western University



Padre Giuseppe Giraldi



Ernest Henry Wilson



BOX KITE

PROSE POEMS
BY BAZIJU
ROO BORSON
& KIM MALTMAN

“It’s a work that grows in the imagination...”

— André Alexis, from Writers’ Trust Best Books of the Year

I call these small narratives and fragments of memory
“events of plants.” Plants are witnesses, participants,
and secret keepers of emotion and memories in life.

The Transformation of Landscape in Canada: The Inside & Outside of Being

Co-curated with Christine Platt and Yang Chao.

Touring exhibition in Xi'an Art Museum (Xi'an, China) and Today Art Museum (Beijing, China). 2014-2015.

Landscape art in Canada has been in constant flux, producing a wide diversity of forms and perspectives. *The Transformation of Landscape in Canada: The Inside & Outside of Being* examines how contemporary Canadian artists have reimagined the concept of landscape since the 1960s, exploring what they have perceived, deconstructed, imagined, and created through their practices. This touring exhibition is the first large-scale presentation of Canadian contemporary art to travel to China since the 1980s.

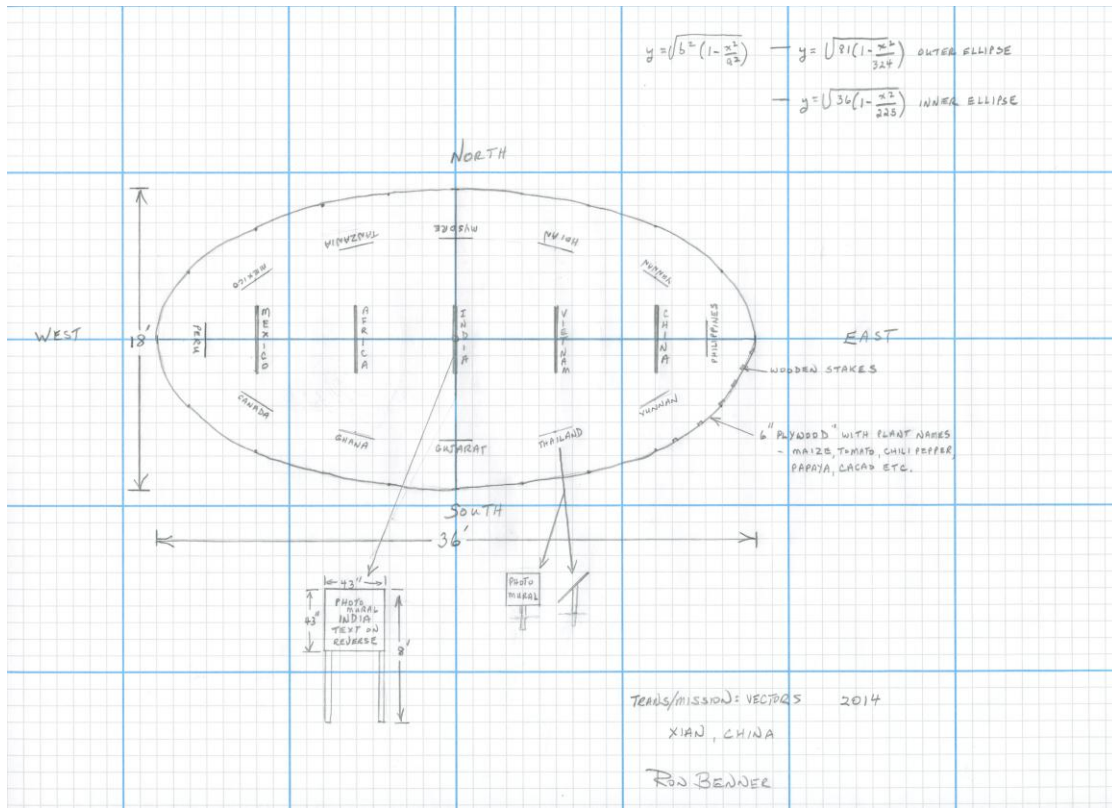
Artists include Michael Snow, IAIN BAXTER, Rebecca Belmore, Ron Benner, Edward Burtynsky, Jean-François Côté, Bonnie Devine, Gu Xiong, Jamelie Hassan, Isabelle Hayeur, Wanda Koop, Andy Patton, Ed Pien, Andrew Wright, Robert Youds, and Gearshifting Performance Works.

Exhibition weblink: <https://www.cacnart.com/transform>

Exhibition catalogue: **Zhou, Yan, Shu Yang, and Christine Platt, eds. 2014.** *The Transformation of Canadian Landscape Art: Inside & Outside of Being*. Xi'an: Xi'an Art Museum.

Essay: **Zhou, Yan. 2014.** "Landscape Encounter: Approaching the Inside and Outside of Being." In *The Transformation of Canadian Landscape Art: Inside & Outside of Being*, edited by Yan Zhou, Shu Yang, and Christine Platt, 15–48. Xi'an: Xi'an Art Museum. https://www.academia.edu/8168082/Landscape_Encounter_Approaching_the_Inside_and_Outside_of_Being





Ron Benner. *Trans/mission: Vectors*, mixed media photographic installation, Xi'an Art Museum, 2014.

Ron Benner: My photographic installation *Trans/mission: Vectors 2014* is presented both within a gallery space of the Xi'an Art Museum and a larger format is located in a public site including a garden within the complex of the Great Tang All-Day Mall, near to the Xi'an Art Museum. The black and white images in the installations were photographed in Mexico, Peru, Canada, Africa, India, the Philippines and China. These photographs were selected from my archives of photographs which were taken during my travels over a fifteen year period. The photographic/garden installation has involved the usual negotiations and dialogues with the site manager, the museum team and curators, the plant nurseries and volunteers in the community. These partnerships have contributed significantly to the realization of this work.

Ron Benner has spent many years traveling the world, tracing the global circulation of plants. In the summer of 2014, he participated in *The Transformation of Landscape in Canada* exhibition. In Xi'an, he created a garden in which he cultivated more than forty plant species that Europeans had transmitted from South America to China. These included potatoes, maize, sweet potatoes, cassava, cashews, Brazil nuts (sapucaia), peanuts, papaya, chili peppers, kidney beans, sunflowers, tobacco, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, tomatoes, pumpkins, cucumbers, prickly pear cactus, cherimoya, soursop, South American custard apples, olives, vanilla, cacao trees, agave, chayote, petunias, nasturtiums, blue salvia, zinnias, begonias, four o'clock flowers, flowering tobacco, snapdragons, marigolds, dahlias, cosmos, spider flowers, morning glories, portulaca, amaranth flowers, ageratum, and verbenas, among others.

Benner told me that in contrast to the overland Eurasian Silk Road, **the maritime routes that emerged during the Age of Exploration, what he calls “The Plant Route”, enabled the global circulation and transplantation of plants, cultivation practices, knowledge, ideas, environments, ecology, and the economies and political systems dependent on them, ultimately transforming the world.**



John J. Thomson photographed the Luís de Camões cemetery in Macau, circa 1870.



《红毛毡》《聊斋全图》
(清光绪绘本) 奥地利国家图书馆藏
“Red Hair's Carpet”, from Complete Illustrations of Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio (Guangxu-era illustrated manuscript, Qing dynasty), collection of the Austrian National Library

This book takes as its warp the stories of European and American plant hunters in China from the 16th century to the early 19th century, and as its weft the historical, political, economic, cultural, and artistic exchanges related to plant collecting. It portrays, over more than three centuries (from the late Ming dynasty to the eve of the First Opium War), the collisions, permeations, and estrangements of knowledge, culture, symbolism, and emotion that unfolded amid the encounters and conflicts between China and Western global colonial empires.

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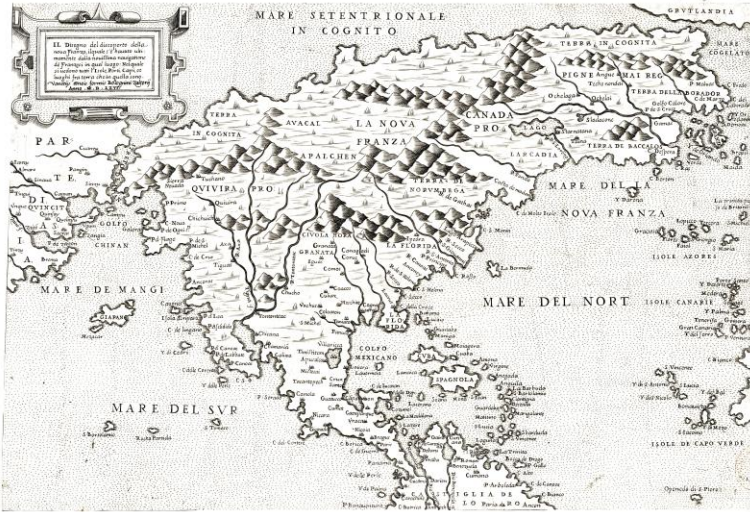
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Afterword. Life, Imagination, and Emotion Embodied in Plants in Early China and Europe

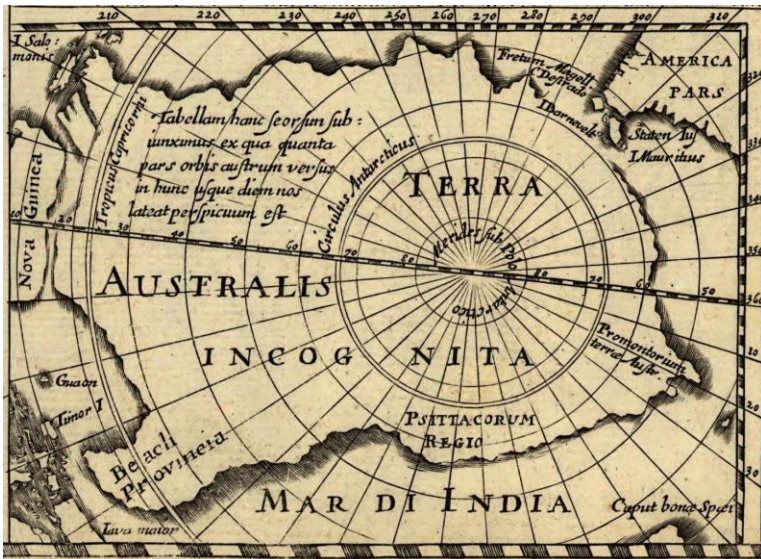


Map of North America from 1566 showing Italian inscriptions, both *Terra In Cognita* and *Mare In Cognito*

The central theme of this book revolves around the paired concepts of “*Terra incognita*” and “*Heterotopias*,” tracing a transformation in worldviews from the colonial to the postcolonial era.

The term *Terra incognita*, first used by Ptolemy in *Geographia*, was widely adopted by colonial explorers during the Age of Discovery to refer to lands “discovered” by Europeans, land that were actually inhabited by indigenous people, but lacked, in their view, recognizable systems of civilization.

The concept of *heterotopias* originates from Michel Foucault. In fact, all cultures can be understood as *heterotopias*: spaces that are both real and enigmatic, and that do not conform to fixed norms or systems of knowledge. I draw on this pair of concepts as a metaphor to explore how plant knowledge is understood across different cultures, and how we might challenge abstract, universalized forms of knowledge to reconstruct new relationships among plants, people, place, history, and culture.



Terra Australis Incognita on a 1618 map



Zhao Mengjian, Three Friends of Winter (Pine, Bamboo, and Plum)
趙孟堅 歲寒三友圖 (松、竹、梅)



Zhao Mengjian, Ink Orchid, Handscroll.
趙孟堅墨蘭圖卷

Our understanding of plants, and the roles and positions they occupy in our world, has never been limited to scientific or utilitarian knowledge.

In traditional cultures, the relationship between humans, the natural world, and the symbolic realm is deeply intertwined.

In human life, plants are used as materials for food, medicine, clothing, ornamentation, construction, tools, and writing.

They serve also as a medium through which people understand and express themselves and the world around them.

The world today is largely shaped by Western thought and epistemological frameworks. China and many other so-called “heterogeneous cultures” have experienced a rupture in their connections to their own historical and symbolic resources. People often rely on translating and appropriating Western symbols and discourses to understand and interpret local issues. The stories and legends, symbols, and sensibilities that once permeated our childhoods are relegated to the margins, categorized as subculture or folk culture, and no longer enter mainstream discourse.

Although the imported symbolic systems provide a certain legitimacy for engaging with and articulating in a global context, they have not established meaningful connections between different symbolic traditions. This condition detaches discourse from history and, at the same time, reinforces social and cultural divisions.





Fundamental concepts, sensibilities, perceptions, and symbolic systems rooted in history and culture form the basis for exchange between different cultures. Therefore, in the appendix of this book, I revisit the cultural histories and symbolic resources embedded in plants, and propose four concepts for further exploration: **名物** identifying and naming plants, **诗教** the teaching of poetics through plants, **情志** ethical and aesthetic aspirations embodied in plants, and **神幻与情念** the mystical, the sacred, transformation, and *Pathosformel*. Through these lenses, I seek to explore possible connections between deep symbolic traditions and the contemporary world, and to activate their inherent potential for revolution.

Qiu Ying. The Garden for Solitary Enjoyment, section, 1515-52. Cleveland Museum of Art.
仇英《独乐园图》

名物 Identifying and Naming Plants

“What sort of insects do you rejoice in, where *you* come from?” the Gnat inquired.

“I don’t *rejoice* in insects at all,” Alice explained, “because I’m rather afraid of them—at least the large kinds. But I can tell you the names of some of them.”

“Of course they answer to their names?” the Gnat remarked carelessly.

“I never knew them to do it.”

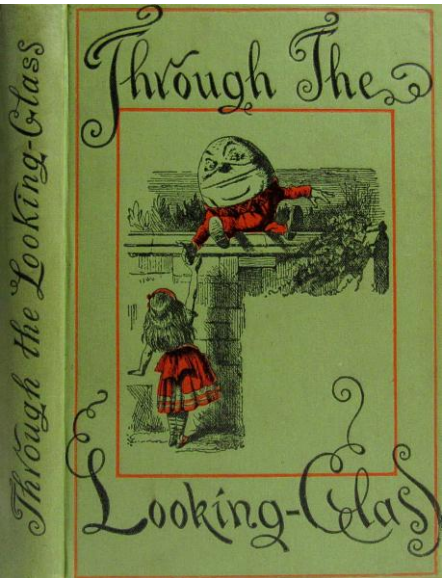
“What’s the use of their having names,” the Gnat said, “if they won’t answer to them?”

“No use to *them*,” said Alice; “but it’s useful to the people who name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?”

“I can’t say,” the Gnat replied. “Further on, in the wood down there, they’ve got no names—however, go on with your list of insects: you’re wasting time.”

A dialogue between a gnat and Alice, in *Through the Looking-Glass And What Alice Found There*, by Lewis Carroll, Chapter III. Looking-Glass Insects.

Naming and classification are human contrivances; the natural world, unknowing and insentient, is compelled into passive participation in these systems.



- In the Chinese context, the term “identifying and naming things” (名物) is a compound of “naming” (名) and “things” (物). Classical Chinese systems of classification were closely related to the structure of written characters.
- The distinctive formation of Chinese characters means that they not only depict the form, main features, and attributes of things, but also indicate phonetic relations; thus, the relationship between name and thing is not purely abstract. Moreover, in representing the features and attributes of things, characters often simultaneously imply relations of category and grouping.
- Sir George Staunton, the British envoy who accompanied Lord Macartney’s mission to China in the late eighteenth century, used the botanical relationship between genus and species to describe the system of naming and classifying things as embodied in the radicals of Chinese characters.
- When using dictionaries, people would naturally acquire a basic understanding of the classification of things through radicals (部首).

Radicals (部首; also called classifiers or indexing component) in the Chinese Characters

A radical, also called classifiers or indexing component, is a structural component of a Chinese character under which the character is traditionally listed in a Chinese dictionary. The radical for a character is typically a semantic component, but it can also be another structural component or an artificially extracted portion of the character. In some cases, the original semantic or phonological connection has become obscure, owing to changes in the meaning or pronunciation of the character over time.

In Chinese dictionaries, there are two types of radicals with different principles:

One type follows philological principles. Based strictly on the *Six Categories of Chinese Characters* (六书), only characters sharing the same semantic component may be grouped under the same radical.

The Six Categories include: pictographs (象形), indicative characters (指事), associative compounds (会意), and phono-semantic compounds (形声)—these four concern methods of character formation; as well as mutually explanatory characters (转注) and phonetic loan characters (假借).

The other type follows lexicographic (dictionary lookup) principles. It classifies characters according to their graphic structure, selecting a common component as the basis for indexing; this shared component is designated as the radical.

For example, the characters “甥” (nephew) and “舅” (maternal uncle) are both placed under the “male” (男) radical in the *Shuowen Jiezi*, according to the Six Categories system. In contrast, the *Kangxi Dictionary*, following the lookup-based system, places “甥” under the “生” radical and “舅” under the “白” radical.

To understand the cultures and practices of identifying and naming things requires clarifying aspects often neglected today due to the distance between contemporary and historical knowledge and ways of life, or misinterpreted through inappropriate impositions from an outsider's perspective.

From a modern Western-centric scientific standpoint, Chinese systems of natural classification are generally regarded as lacking logical structure. The most influential articulation of this view appears in Michel Foucault's preface to *The Order of Things*, where he discusses the so-called absurdity of the Chinese classificatory scheme referenced by Borges and John Wilkins in their construction of an "analytical language." Foucault denies that ancient Chinese thought possessed a logic of classification based on the comparison of *tableau*—that is, general properties of things.

The earliest Chinese texts to record and describe plants include the *Shijing*, the *Chu Ci*, and the *Erya*, among others.

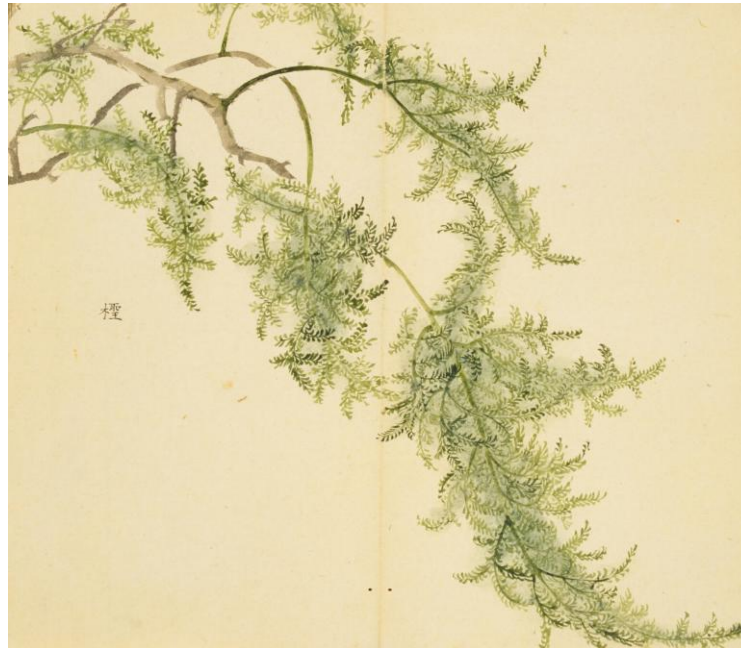
The *Shijing* (詩經; *The Book of Songs*, *Book of Odes*, or simply *the Odes*) is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, comprising 305 works dating from the 11th to the 7th centuries BCE. It is traditionally believed that ancient kings dispatched official poetry collectors (採詩官) throughout the realm to gather folk songs, including those that implicitly criticized governance. These collected verses, together with court hymns and eulogies (some ritual in nature, others recounting historical narratives of earlier dynasties) formed the *Shijing*. It later became one of the **Five Classics**, traditionally associated with the editorial work of Confucius, and has been studied and memorized by scholars in China and neighboring regions for over two millennia.

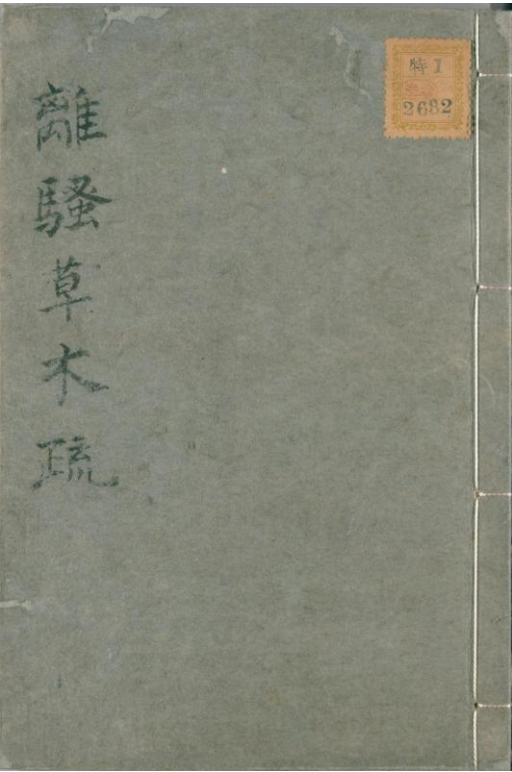
In the *Shijing*, birds, animals, and plants are recorded with diverse and concrete names. These often carry specific associations with regional geography, climate, landscapes, local customs, historical memory, as well as everyday labor and symbolic meaning. In this way, natural elements are closely embedded in lived experience and social reality.

In *Shijing Mingwu Tujie* (詩經名物圖解; *Illustrated Annotations to the Names and Objects in the Book of Songs*) by Hosoi Jun (1798–1862), three plants mentioned in the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*) are illustrated and explained: 栲 (lie), 檉 (cheng), and 檿 (yan).

- 栲 (lie): Often identified with a kind of wild plum or small tree bearing edible fruit, though its precise botanical classification remains debated in traditional scholarship.
- 檉 (cheng): Commonly associated with the tamarisk (genus *Tamarix*), a salt-tolerant shrub or small tree found in arid or coastal regions.
- 檿 (yan): Usually interpreted as a type of mountain mulberry or wild fruit tree, possibly related to species of *Morus* or similar genera.

Hosoi Jun's work combines philological research with visual representation, reflecting the long tradition of correlating textual references in the *Book of Songs* with identifiable elements in the natural world. His illustrations not only aim to clarify ancient plant names but also demonstrate how classical texts were read through the lenses of natural history and material culture in East Asia.





Wu Renjie (Song dynasty), *Lishao Caomu Shu*
(A Botanical Commentary on the *Li Sao*), 4
volumes.

【宋】吳仁傑（撰）離騷草木疏四卷

The *Chu Ci* (楚辭; *Songs of Chu*, *Elegies of Chu*, or *Songs of the South*) is another foundational anthology of early Chinese poetry. It includes works traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan and Song Yu from the Warring States period, along with many later compositions from the Han dynasty.

In the *Chu Ci*, there is also an extremely rich representation of flora and fauna. However, it places stronger emphasis on the symbolic, emotional, and imaginative dimensions of plant imagery. Plants in *Chu Ci* often function as carriers of personal sentiment, spiritual transformation, and a world of mythic or visionary experience, forming a highly expressive and lyrical universe.

Together, the *Shijing* and the *Chu Ci* stand as two canonical pillars of Chinese literary culture, shaping enduring poetic, aesthetic, and ethical characters of the Chinese culture.

Chinese characters, dictionaries, and the classification of the natural world



Phonetic Diagrams of the *Erya*

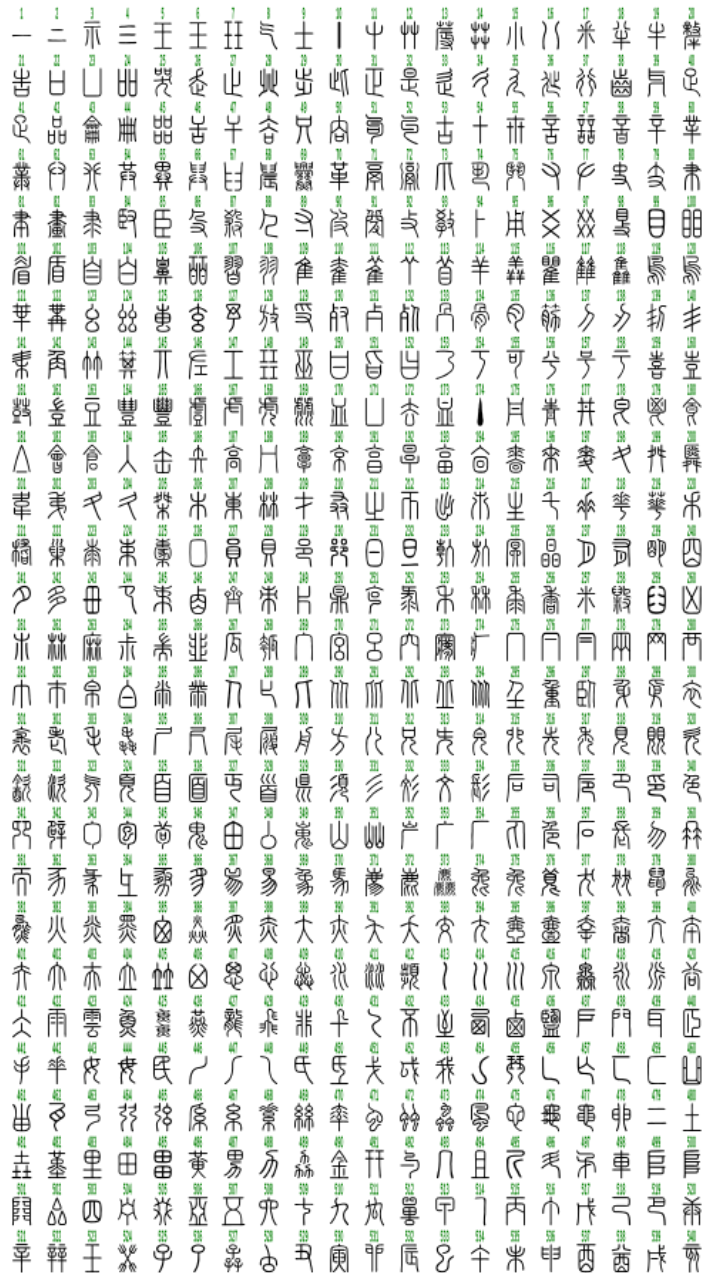
The *Erya* (爾雅) is the earliest surviving Chinese dictionary. The sinologist Bernhard Karlgren concluded that “the major part of its glosses must reasonably date from the 3rd century BC.” He argued that the book “is not a dictionary *in abstracto*, but a collection of direct glosses to concrete passages in ancient texts.”

The text contains 2,094 entries, covering about 4,300 words, with a total of 13,113 characters, and is divided into nineteen sections. **The last seven sections on grasses, trees, insects and reptiles, fish, birds, wild animals, and domestic animals, describe more than 590 kinds of flora and fauna. It is the earliest Chinese document of natural history and historical biogeography.**

List of the 540 Shuōwén Jiězì Radicals

说文解字的五百四十个部首表

說文解字的五百四十個部首表



Radicals (部首) in Chinese characters related to plants include: wood (木), grass (艹 / 艸), bamboo (竹), grain (禾), fruit (果), and others.

The *Shuowen Jiezi* is a Chinese dictionary compiled by Xu Shen around 100 CE. It contains the first comprehensive analysis of Chinese characters in terms of their structure. It was also the first to organize its entries into sections based on shared components, known as radicals.

In the *Shuowen Jiezi*, there are 421 characters under the “wood” radical, 445 under the “grass” radical, 144 under the “bamboo” radical, and 87 under the “grain” radical. Together, these four radicals account for 1,097 characters, representing **11.7%** of the total 9,353 characters recorded in the *Shuowen Jiezi*.

The 540 radicals used by the *Shuowen Jiezi* in the original seal script

部首为“禾”的汉字:

● 总笔画3画的汉字

hé
禾

● 总笔画7画的汉字

rén sì tū tǔ xiù
禾 稊 秃 秃 秀

● 总笔画8画的汉字

bǐng gǎn nián xiān yì zǐ
秉 秆 年 籼 秣 籽

● 总笔画9画的汉字

bǐ chá fēn hào jǐng jù kāi miào qiū qiū
秕 秅 秈 粉 耗 抗 拒 科 秒 秋 秣

yù yún zhī zhī chōng zǐ
秬 耘 秭 秭 种 秭

● 总笔画10画的汉字

bàn bā chèn chèn tái jí kù lì líng bí
稈 稊 称 秤 稔 积 秬 秣 稊 稊 稊

mò ní nián piē piē qín shù zhī yāng yóu
秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣

zhī zū zuó
秣 租 秣

● 总笔画11画的汉字

dù hé huì huò jiē lù nòng rén tóng zhù
秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣 秣

yí yín zhī zhī zǐ
秣 秣 秣 秣 秣

● 总笔画12画的汉字

chéng fú fū gǎn kǎo jīng kǔn láng shāo shuì
程 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊

shuì tí tú xī zè
秣 稊 稊 稊 稊

● 总笔画13画的汉字

bài bāng chóu gǔ jī kē kǔn léng bīng lù
稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊 稊

部首为“艹”的汉字:

● 总笔画3画的汉字

cǎo
艹

● 总笔画4画的汉字

yì
艺

● 总笔画5画的汉字

ài jiāo jiǎo jié là nǎi tiáo tǐng
艾 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

● 总笔画6画的汉字

chāi dù gān xià jī máng mián péng qí qiān
艾 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

shāo suǐ wán xiāng xiōng yì yù yù zhī zhì
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

● 总笔画7画的汉字

āo bā biàn cǎng cháng cōng fēn è fāng fú
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

fóu fèi háng huā huā jì gōu gài jù jué
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

kǒu lì lú mào bì pǐ qí qì qiān qiān
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

qiē qín qín rén rēng rǎi shān sù tún wēi
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

wēi wén wú wú xián xīn dì yán yí yí
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

yīn yǎo yún yún zhī zhǐ zhǐ níng
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

● 总笔画8画的汉字

bā bāo pèi bì bī bēn bīng bó chí cōng dí
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

tī dié dōng fàn fú fú gān gōu gū hóng
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

hū jīng jū kē kǔ lì líng lóng máo máo
苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲 苲

部首为“木”的汉字:

● 总笔画4画的汉字

mù dēng
木 朮

● 总笔画5画的汉字

běn mò zhú shù * wèi zhá
本 朮 朮 朮 朮 朮 朮

● 总笔画6画的汉字

bā bǐ tīng cǐ dǎo duǒ duǒ jī jiū lì
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

piào qiū quán rén * shā xiǔ zá zhū
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

● 总笔画7画的汉字

biāo cǎi chǎ chǐ cūn dī dù fán gǔ gān
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

gāng gōng jī jié shān lái mǎ lì máng máng
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

qī qiān rěn shā xiǎn shù tiào zhé * wū
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

wù xìng xún yǔ yáng yí yí zhàng zǐ
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

● 总笔画8画的汉字

àng bǎn bēi bǐ bǎi chéng chǒu chǔ chún cōng dī
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

dōng dǒu è biǎn fāng fèi fén fēng fú gāo
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

gòu guì guǒ háng hù huà jī jiǎn jié yún
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

lǐ lín lú lù mào méi mǎo nán nán chǒu bā
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

pí qiāng ruì dǒu shì shù shù sōng sōng sōng
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

wǎng xī sī xiān xiāo xīn xún yá zhū yǎo
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

miǎo yī yuán yuè yùn zǎo zhào zhěn qī huà
杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌 杌

部首为“竹”的汉字:

● 总笔画6画的汉字

zhú
竹

● 总笔画8画的汉字

lǎ zhú
笋 笋

● 总笔画9画的汉字

chí dǔ gān jī máng péng * yú zhú
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

● 总笔画10画的汉字

bā cén gāng hū jī xiǎo pí zhēn sūn suàn
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

xiào yá yī yuán zhào zhū zǐ
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

● 总笔画11画的汉字

bāo bèn biān cè chí dá dí dī dōng fán
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

fàn fú fú fú gē gōu gū jiā jiǎn lì líng
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

mǎo mǐn * nà nú fá pō qiè qióng qióng
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

shān shēng shǐ tì sī táng xiá zé zhū
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

● 总笔画12画的汉字

bǐ bǐ cè chéng chí chǎo dá dāng dēng fá guì
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

háng jī jiǎo jīn jǔ kǒu kuǎng guā lái luò
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

sūn qū quán rú shāi tǐng tǒng xiǎn yán yào
筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴 筴

yīn zhēng zhōng zhù
筴 筴 筴 筴

Some Characters under the “grain” radical, the “grass” radical, the “wood” radical, and the “bamboo” radical in the *Xinhua Zidian* (新华字典)

- In ancient times, language first emerged from local cultures and regional dialects. With cultural and linguistic integration or historical change, many once-familiar histories of names and things gradually became strange or obscured. People can no longer confirm certain inherited written forms and their corresponding referents, nor fully grasp their meanings or recover their pronunciations. Even with the aid of scholarly tools, contemporary readers often encounter things without knowing their names, or names without knowing their referents and symbolic associations.
- Chinese people have long been attentive to the visible connection between things and their names, while also accommodating the possibilities of change and abstraction. Although systems of classification tend toward simplicity, things in Chinese characters often remain concrete and sensuously perceptible. Through the structural combination of characters and sounds in the process of character formation, the bodily and affective relations between humans and things are also rendered visible and perceptible.
- Early botanical observation and study possessed a kind of simple scientific spirit without the designation of “science.” Although ancient people did not have the modern scientific capacity to understand molecular, cellular, genetic, or organic structural levels, their view of nature constituted another kind of more complex and profound holistic vision, one that encompassed the natural world, the world of symbols, and the sacred and supernatural realms. This is reflected in their practices of naming and classification (*the practice of identifying and naming plants*).

诗教 The Teaching of Poetics Through Plants



Confucius said, "...If they show themselves men who are mild and gentle, sincere and good, they have been taught from the Book of Poetry."

“溫柔敦厚，《詩》教也” 《禮記—經解》 (“The different teaching of the different kings”, in. “The Classic of Rites”)

“Man has no notion of moral fitness but from Education. Naturally he is only a natural organ subject to Sense.”

William Blake. "There is No Natural Religion." 1788.

William Blake. "There is No Natural Religion." 1788.

- “The Teaching of Poetics” (诗教) constitutes a worldview and cosmology that, through the unification and formalization of ethical values and aesthetic sensibilities, is integrated into a symbolic order aligned with and serving systems of governance. It shapes the shared ethics, modes of cognition, sensibilities, aesthetics, expression, and communication within a culture and society.
- “The Teaching of Poetics” is not limited to poetry alone. All forms of creative expression within the symbolic realm, including poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, theater, and others, fall within its scope.
- Prior to modern education in both East and West, literacy was the privilege of a minority. Yet through visual forms, oral narratives, music, and performance that are often conveyed through allegory and symbolism and frequently intertwined with ritual and systems of belief, even those without formal education could grasp meanings intuitively and experience aesthetic resonance without relying on expert interpretation. This constitutes a world of ideas and emotions in which universal symbols are continually renewed and transformed, nurtured through an ancient and everyday connection with the world.

The Master said, “My children, why do you not study the Book of Poetry? The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them you learn the more immediate duty of serving one's father, and the remoter one of serving one's prince. From them we become largely acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants.” *The Analects of Confucius* 《論語》. Translated by James Legge.

For Confucius, the ability to identify plants was part of the “Teaching of Poetics” (*shijiao*, 诗教), and a fundamental component of the Confucian order of *li* (rites) and self-cultivation.



Odes of the State of Bin, Book of Songs, section, painted by Ma Hezhi (Song Dynasty, mid-12th century). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 【南宋】馬和之《詩經》幽風圖卷

Traditionally, the ideal of the **Teaching of Poetics** is to cultivate individuals endowed with ethical virtue and aesthetic sensibility in the service of family and state. When Confucianism elevates poetry (詩) from the spontaneous expressions of “affective stirring” (興), “observation” (觀), “empathy” (群), and “remonstrance” (怨) into the domain of serving one’s father and ruler, poetic instruction is perpetuated through the continual interpretation and reinterpretation of this specific symbolic order, shaping and cultivating subjects who conform to the order of patriarchal authority. Yet this symbolic order, grounded in patriarchy, hierarchy, and a closed, exclusionary structure of consciousness, once fixed and rigidified, falls into endless repetition, and extinguishes the possibility of internal renewal. Both poetics and the human subject become habituated to convention, losing vitality and imagination. While it may foster individuals of profound talent and cultural loyalty, it also, inevitably, constrains their lives and freedom.

I expand the conceptual scope of the Teaching of Poetics, no longer limiting it to the domain of Confucian *li* (禮; rites), but extending it metaphorically to encompass all symbolic systems through which poetics shapes, expresses, and embodies particular worldviews and structures of governance, and reflects the shared ethical and aesthetic values of a culture.

Within this expanded framework, Confucian *li*-based culture, the syncretic pagan culture of the Roman Empire, and early Christian culture can be brought into a comparable analytical frame, thereby opening the possibility of confronting them with contemporary thought and consciousness.



- As symbolic forms embedded in systems of belief, ritual, and authority, plants have origins that recede into deep antiquity, their beginnings long obscured.
- In ancient Greek and Roman religious imaginaries, the association between Dionysus and the grape was later transformed and incorporated into the Christian symbolic system of Christ and wine. The laurel, once the emblem of Apollo, is re-coded as a sign of imperial sovereignty in the Roman Empire. The lily, once associated with Hera, is transposed as a symbol of the Virgin's purity, and later, in the Middle Ages, became an emblem of French royal power.
- The specific meanings attached to these symbols may erode or become opaque over time, but the symbolic forms and their material carriers remain deeply embedded in culture. Rather than disappearing, they undergo continual processes of translation, displacement, and re-inscription, sustaining a *longue durée* of symbolic transformation.

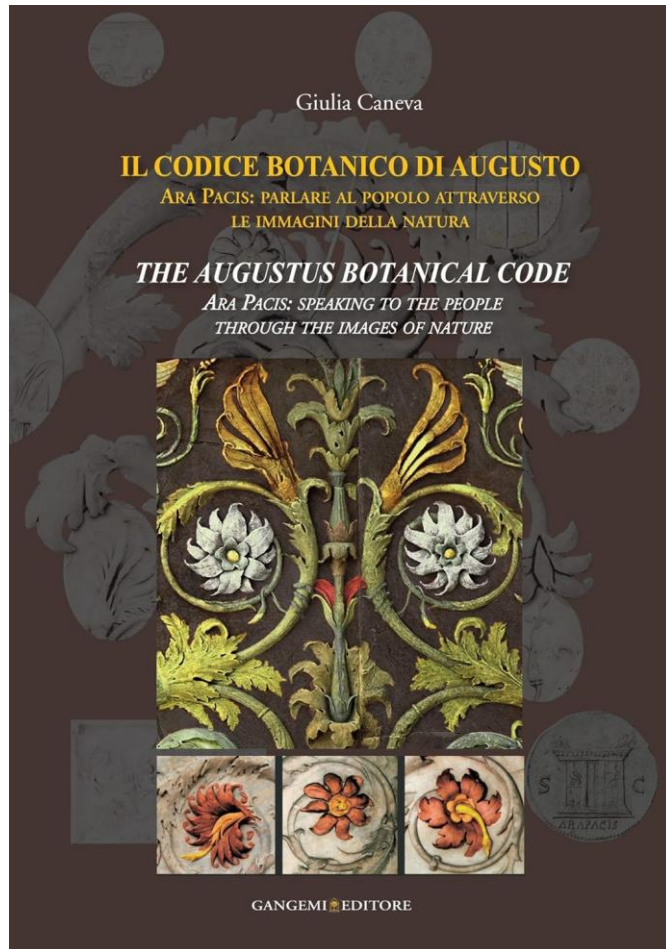


T-shaped Silk Painting from Mawangdui Tomb No. 3. 168 BC. Hunan Province Museum. 马王堆三号汉墓T型帛画
Lararium of the House of the Centenary, Pompeii. 55-79 CE. Naples Archaeological Museum.



From left to right:

- The Rubbing of the Wu Liang Shrine, built in 151 CE. 武梁祠拓片
- Janice Gurney at the Ara Pacis Augustae, Augustus' Great Altar of Peace (Ara Pacis Augustae). Photo by Andy Patton.
- Painted Garden, Villa of Livia, fresco, 30-20 B.C.E. Museo Nazionale Romano.



In the early phase of imperial unification, diverse local cultures and traditions were tolerated and accommodated. Yet, as imperial processes of assimilation intensified, cultural diversity either disappeared; or was transformed and reinterpreted, acquiring new meanings; or, as relegated as “pagan” culture, circulating within more concealed social spaces such as the private or the marginal, and popular domains, where it nonetheless persisted and continued to intersect with dominant culture.

情志 Ethical and Aesthetic Aspirations

Some people may wonder why I claim that, since its emergence, the contemporary Chinese art world has always rebelled against, resisted, or distanced itself from the state, institutions, and capitalism. To understand this, one must understand the inseparable ethical and aesthetic principles deeply rooted in Chinese culture.



情志 Ethical and Aesthetic Aspirations Embodied in Plants

Certain Chinese plants, such as the Four Gentlemen (plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum), the “Three Friends of the Cold Season” (pine, bamboo, and plum), and fragrant grasses and secluded orchids, have long been cherished by the Chinese people as an affective “genetic code” in their culture, permeating everyday emotional and spiritual life. The ethical and aesthetic values they embody (情志) are taken as self-evident. Even when their symbolic meanings have been attenuated in the modern world, these ornamental plants remain intimately familiar in both public and private spaces, representing ideals of independence and noble character.

In Western cultural traditions, such a sustained system of vegetal ethical-aesthetic symbolism is relatively rare. While certain plants may carry divine associations or ethical meanings conferred by religious systems, these tend to operate at a transcendent level, rather than **embodying clearly articulated human dispositions of spirit, morality, emotion, and aesthetic sensibility**. **The embodiment of *ethical and aesthetic aspirations in plants* is thus a distinctive phenomenon of Chinese cultural history.**



This cultural phenomenon originates with Qu Yuan and is brought to sublime in Tao Yuanming. Qu Yuan, wandering and chanting by the marshes, wearing orchids and singing of fragrance of plants, was rejected by the world yet remained aloof from a corrupted world, standing independently, neither conforming nor seeking gain. Through his life and poetry, he established a normative measure of cultural spirit and ethical-aesthetic cultivation in Chinese tradition, inscribing a fundamental linkage between plant life and human affective, aesthetic, and ethical disposition (情志).



Tao Yuanming further extended this tradition by introducing dimensions of self-forgetting and freedom into an existential register, whereby the chrysanthemum and the willow became symbols of an independent spirit characterized by “not bending under poverty or low status” and “rejoicing while forgetting sorrow.”

神幻与情念 The Mystical, The Sacred, Transformation, and Pathosformel



In Chinese culture, love, especially between men and women, is almost always situated within a world order governed by the Confucian orthodoxy. This ordered world is fundamentally a male, patriarchal structure. Men cannot truly negate it, but can only estrange themselves from their own moral claims. Within this ordered world, equal love is in fact difficult, if not impossible, to realize. The realization of love (情) and justice (义) is instead entrusted to women. Only by negating or transforming this order can both love and ethical commitment coexist.

Many female figures devote themselves unwaveringly to love, persisting through life and death with intense emotional commitment. When faced with moral crises or questions of justice, they sacrifice their lives to uphold righteousness. They pursue justice beyond death, transforming into ghosts and spirits rather than relinquishing their struggle until justice is restored. They never give up voicing love and moral truths to the human world.



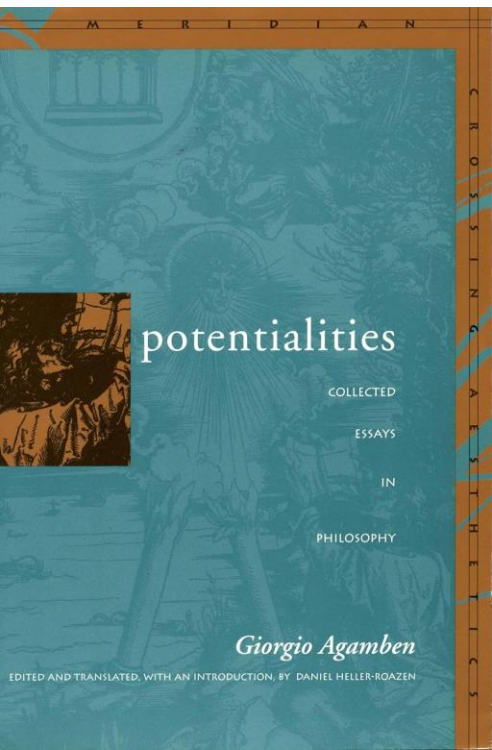
Korean poetry has always existed in two tiers. One was metred poetry with matching numbers of syllables written by aristocratic men and the other kind was women's songs. The poems by the aristocrats were written in classical Chinese, and the men who excelled in writing poetry in the civil servant examination administered by the palace were granted a position as scholar-officials. However, women composed poems based on their daily existence, love, grief endured under their in-laws, poverty, labour, along with fantasies that arose due to oppression. These poems were sung and orally transmitted, and it was not until the 20th century that they were documented in books. The only poems by aristocratic men that I find interesting are the ones written in exile by men expelled from their government positions by the king. **Their poems were written very much from a feminine position with a feminine voice.** I prefer the 'voice of the expelled' in poetry by the expelled men who have been removed from power rather than poetry written by those in power.

As I began writing poetry, I often felt as if my tongue were paralysed. I had no role model for poetry... Therefore, I thought to myself that I needed to reinvent my mother tone.



Aby Warburg. Mnemosyne-Aby Warburg's Atlas, Panel 46. Nymph. 'Hurry-Bring-It' in the Tornabuoni circle. Domestication. <https://warburg.library.cornell.edu/panels/panel-46>

Drawing on Aby Warburg and Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the figure of the Nymph (Nympha) in relation to the *Pathosformel* (emotive formula), I reflect on the "collective and historical affects and desires" embedded in artistic and symbolic images. From this perspective, I explore the affective and ethical force of female figures in Chinese culture, as well as a world shaped by love, transformation, and mystery, in which femininity and nature play a constitutive role in an affective order of love and justice (情义).

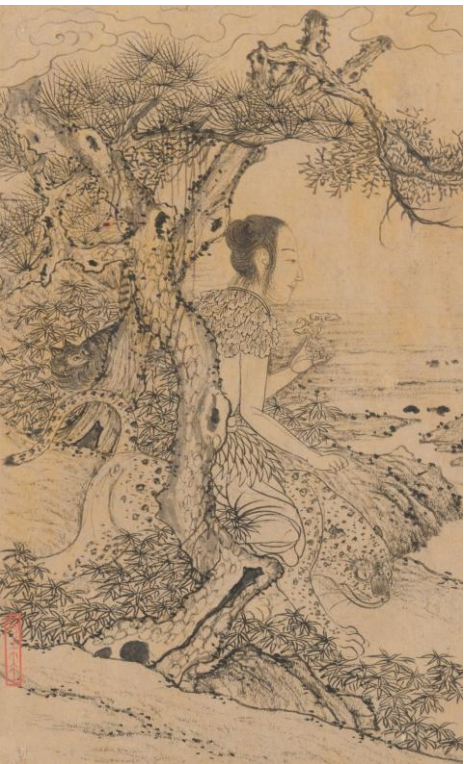


“Pathosformel designates an indissoluble intertwining of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula in which it is impossible to distinguish between form and content...”

Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 90.



Although premodern Chinese and European cultures differ in origin, foundational intellectual structures, and historical trajectories, the symbolic configurations of the Nymph and Dryad and Chinese figures such as mountain spirits and flower fairies (花仙), in which humans, plants, and animals undergo mutual metamorphosis and transformation, display striking similarities. These figures occupy an important place in their respective cultural memories and collective affective consciousness.



The archetypal forms of desire and romantic imagination in Chinese culture were crystallized in the *Chuci* (*Songs of Chu*), where they become a foundational *Pathosformel* (情念模式, emotive formula). In the *Nine Songs*, we find both ritual hymns dedicated to mountain and forest deities and poetic articulations of mythological figures and affective imagination. Aby Warburg describes the Nymph as, in essence, an elemental spirit, a displaced pagan goddess. Qu Yuan's "Mountain Spirit" (山鬼) can be understood as precisely such a figure transformed from an elemental spirit into a symbol of escape and displaced romantic desire.

Glass cameo: Dionysos and a nymph. Roman. 1st century BCE–3rd century CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Anonymous (Yuan/Ming dynasty), "The Mountain Spirit" (山鬼), after Zhao Mengfu's Illustrations to the Nine Songs of Chuci.

【元/明】佚名，倣趙孟頫《九歌圖》之“山鬼”

After the *Chuci*, countless myths, legends, and artistic creations further developed the primordial symbolic figures of the mystical, the sacred, and transformation. Over two millennia of cultural history thus bear witness to the continuity and transformation of this *Pathosformel*.

In Chinese culture, mountain spirits, flower fairies corresponding to the Nymph, and other “desired ideal feminine forms,” as well as female ghosts, are capable of metamorphosis and the transformation of life.

These figures preserve mnemonic traces of an original continuity between the vitality of nature and human existence. At the same time, they constitute a hidden and oblique channel of emotional and imaginative expression within a doctrinal and patriarchal order, where they function as one of the few socially permissible outlets for love and justice. In this sense, they represent a limited but sustained form of psychic equilibrium across millennia, and a primary site for the articulation of imagination and desire.



Aby Warburg argues that the pagan spirit of antiquity persists in transformed and concealed forms, passing through the Middle Ages, re-emerging in the Renaissance, and later re-igniting in modernity, most notably in Édouard Manet's representations of women, in which feminine figures appear to confront the patriarchal gaze of bourgeois men.

In the contemporary world, perhaps those who today transcend gender identities and forms of consciousness prescribed by patriarchal culture are the new Nymphs of our time. They break through inherited *Pathosformel* and regimes of desire projection, continuously generating new symbolic forms of affect with emergent subjectivity.

Congratulations! & Thank you

