

## The Poem "The Three Sisters" - A Reply To My Critics



Ying-tzu 應子, Xiamen, July 2019  
(WeChat 13788909712)

The brouhaha that has erupted in the wake of the publication of my poem "The Three Sisters" (July 11 in my WeChat timeline) is unprecedented. The hubbub culminated as the Secretary of the Shanxi PEN Club wrote me and told me to stop writing poems, and subsequently wrote me the following day and assured me that firstly, contrary to what I claim, Classical Chinese characters that are uncommonly used today do not possess a soul on their own, and secondly, nobody reads my poems.

三妹

渭河畔童英  
晝後臥乃起  
樂嘖語閒行  
竭金上京役  
日日笑無患

渭河畔童聖  
長安夙興求  
妖女受尉職  
賈肆盜皆搜  
如驪高孜孜

渭河畔童明  
與居洛濱家  
愛小兒鼓琴  
遊母畦憇穡  
見費企為儉

Before that climax of oratory, several fellow writers already had complained that they didn't understand the glossary of some of my

poems, while at the same time acknowledging that they were unfamiliar with the Classical Chinese language. Others again pointed out that I didn't adhere to the established meters of Tang poetry. That last criticism is fully merited, as I do not write Tang poetry, but Ying poetry. I am Ying-tzu and I write Ying verse, while availing myself of Classical Chinese glossary. It is an experimental thing. Get over it.

I started to write Ying poetry last year as I was going through a personal catharsis. The poetry was self-therapeutical and effective. The poems allowed me to define and excise emotions that bogged me down, although the poems were initially just read by a handful of people. Below is my favourite poem from this period, which was later published in the Jincheng 2019 exhibition catalogue alongside the painting "Madonna 2014":

### 歸晉

十椽百卷篋，已而鏽皆閑  
五日馬衣鞮，滬嘉穀無遺  
懷晉室家處，念妹疾復乎

The glossary in most of my poems is drawn from the text corpus of Classical Chinese, which is usually delimited by two main linguistic periods: Archaic Chinese (上古漢語) from the earliest examples of oracle bones at about 1250 BC to the Qin unification of China in 221 BC, and Middle Chinese (中古漢語) from the publication of Qieyun in 601 AD to the end of the Song Dynasty in 1279 AD. The bulk of the vocabulary of my poems is drawn from sources from the first millenium AD.

I welcome criticism of my poetry, although I am partial to informed criticism. Do tell me when my verse doesn't rhyme well, it occasionally doesn't, and do tell me if you have a suggestion or an improvement! What is then uninformed criticism? I certainly would count "*I do not understand all the characters you use, so why do you write poems, huh*" as uninformed criticism. If you are unfamiliar with Church Slavonic or Old English, then please refrain from literary criticism of Church Slavonic or Old English texts - even if the texts are written today, and the same goes for Classical Chinese.

"In the West, nobody writes in Old English" represents another form of uninformed criticism. One may only look to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia to find essays in Old English written today:

*Pæt Ænglisc spræc is Pestgermaniscu spræc, þe fram Englalande aras. Heo is sibb þære Ealdfresiscan spræce and þære Ealdseaxiscan spræce. Heo is gastleas spræc, and heo ne hæfþ nan folc todæg, ac heo is gesprecen on þisse Picipædie.*

In Europe one even finds attempts to revive the original Proto Indo-European language (and label it Modern Indo-European) and make it the official language of the European Union. Although this remains the pastime of a select few diehards, the movement has got quite a few academic heavyweights onboard, and I wouldn't dismiss the effort offhand. I certainly wouldn't overlook it. Nor ought we to ignore how the State of Israel has restored the Hebrew language, which was once a dead language, lastly being spoken as an everyday language 1700 years ago, and which today is the official language of Israel.

My interest in Classical Chinese as a language in its own right does not imply a wish to revive it, I just think that the glossary and the individual characters used in Classical Chinese have a history, a charm, a beauty, and most importantly, a soul on their own, even if dissociated from context, all which lend them to poetic license today. Allow me to cite an example of such a character from the poem "Three Sisters":

麕

Anyone familiar with Modern Chinese knows the character 岩, meaning 'cliff', 'rock' or 'mountain'. The Classical Chinese form of this character was 巖 or 巖. Now imagine removing the mountain radical 山 from this character and putting a deer radical 鹿 in its place. What do you get? Answer: A goat - 麕.

History ✓ Charm ✓ Beauty ✓ Intuitivity ✓ Soul ✓

Case closed.