

Two Letters from Jeremy Halvard Prynne to All Members of the English Poetry Studies Institute

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My dear friends,

This is a message to the whole Tribe of Epsians, past and present, many now gathered together to celebrate a special birthday and to remember so many things, from shared experience and from the joy of study. This message comes to you from another Epsian, now far away in geography but near at hand in remembrance and sharing of our joint purposes: to understand poetry and literature, to understand ourselves and to understand the world. Surely a modest set of aims!

What gives the motive for this occasion is the start of a Western New Year, and the arrival of a most special birthday. There is some obscurity about exactly which birthday Professor Ou is celebrating, and we should probably have to consult some Ping-Pong Oracle in order to find out. But the assembled tribes-people at Huadu will not worry too much about this, because I am sure that a few tasty banquets will take your minds off exact calculation. Even so, surely a few things are quite certain and shall be in our thoughts. First, so much is owed to the great founding spirit of this community—Professor Dai Liu-Lin (Ou Hong’s note: here it should be “Liu-ling”, great scholar, enlightened teacher, and loyal good friend. I am proud to have known him, and it was he who sent to study with me at Cambridge a young and inexperienced student called Mr. Ou Hong.

Second, and because of this happy event, Dr. Ou in due time becomes Professor Ou and is inspired to set up EPSI and the whole programme of English-Poetry graduate study at Zhongshan Daxue, of which flourishing institution I am proud to be a Guest Professor.

Editor’s Note: This is a letter written by J.H. Prynne to all members of the English Poetry Studies Institute at the School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University.

Professor Ou is a most unusual scholar and teacher, because in despite of his extremely wide learning and grasp of argument and understanding of many issues, and despite his almost supernatural knowledge of the English language in all its many aspects, he is a truly modest man. He is of course astute in judgement, but he lends his astuteness to his students, expects no reverential attitudes, keeps up links of simple human friendship, and won't stand on ceremony except only when a grand banquet is set out on the table and the rule of the moment then is: to be relaxed, considerate towards old friends and new, and to have a good time. This is a very ceremonial rule and I have been lucky to observe it many times in action.

The third thing that is quite certain on this special occasion is this. EPSI has a great heart and soul as a continuing enterprise, because of its members. All of you who share in its life, and work so hard to achieve your study ambitions, are what forms its character and its unique value. You never lose contact with this link to your origins in advanced study, your links with one another, even though you go out to so many far distant places to continue your work. It is like a family, and it is a great honour to English-language poetry that, from a very different cultural background, you dedicate yourselves to understanding the deep arts of poetry, in a modern world for which this is hardly an important pursuit.

Therefore, EPSI is a wonderful band of fellow students and teachers, and Professor Ou's birthday is the right occasion to remember these things, and to wish him Many Happy Returns!

Lao Pu

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Dear Xiao Chen,

It seems to be a long time since I have been in touch with you, but be sure that none of you are forgotten, as I shall explain. But first, let me through you send warmest greetings to all members of the famous Tribe, and welcome salutes to the new members also. How clearly I remember our afternoon tea parties and chats, our festive dinners around Zhongda, our many visits in my little apartment at Guangda and the neighbourhood I came to know so well, and the many consultations with you all about your studies. It was a good time and I enjoyed very much our company together, because you are all scholars working to advance the tasks of learning, and all of you amusing and delightful companions. I hope that everything is going well with your little society, now that the weather is cooler for you; over here it has suddenly turned very cold and so our winter has truly arrived. My new students are bright and very hardworking, which is a great pleasure, and my great Library is flourishing, so that I have plenty to do.

Xiao Li has been keeping me up-to-date with some developments with you in Guangzhou, and I have been glad to receive your own messages and also from several others as well. Perhaps in turn you can pass this message on to all members of the Tribe, so that we can be in touch by that means and share our news. But first of all, to show that I really have been thinking about all of you, let me explain some activities that I have been pursuing. First, your various individual study projects. To some of you I have written individually, with plans to search for special text materials and information. But then I was happy to receive your collective list of the wants and needs of each one of you. I have worked through these lists to check each one, and have arranged and printed them out so that I can determine what best to

Editor's Note: Here "Xiao Chen" refers to Shangzhen Chen, the Grade 2004 PhD student of the School of Foreign Languages at Sun Yat-sen University, also associate professor of Lingnan Normal University.

do. I have agreed with Xiao Li that as I am able to locate materials for you all and have them sent over, they shall be shipped firstly to him, by a route which has already been well established, so that he can pass them on as appropriate, to the EPSI Library for the first use of each one of you. I have worked down these lists with the aim of discovering on the Internet copies for sale of approximately two significant works from the top or near the top of each person's list; I have been successful in most cases, and I have ordered these works, and they are even now in process of being mailed to Xiao Li, from all quarters of the world at large. I am having some problems so far with the list of Hu Anjiang because his needs are very specialised, but I am working on them. Likewise Xu Jian has mentioned only two works, and I have not yet managed to locate copies that are affordable. And now your own case: the *Life of Sidney* by Wallace is far too old-fashioned to be up-to-date with modern information and ideas, so I have instead ordered a fine biography by Katharine Duncan-Jones; she is an Oxford scholar, known to me, and her full-length biographical study is well regarded. And then you have asked some questions about Renaissance prosody, and I have been having discussions with Dr Gavin Alexander about your concerns. He was pleased to hear about your work, and that you liked his recent book and have found it useful, and he is thinking about what further materials might be useful to you. In particular I mentioned your interest in linguistic aspects (diphthongs, etc) and I asked him who might be well-informed on such topics. We could not think of a scholar in England; but he has been in touch with a scholar in America who has the appropriate linguistic expertise, and she has published two articles of which Dr Alexander has offprints; he has promised to photocopy them and send the copies to me, for onward transmission to you (via Xiao Li), together with any of his own reading lists which he thinks might be useful. By my own investigations I find that there is not very much recently on topics in experimental Renaissance prosody, but I have been finding chapters in recent books which can maybe help you, and I am photocopying these in my Library, to send over. Thus by stages we make

advances. I will forward to you the confirmation e-mails that I have received in connection with study books which I have already ordered, so that you shall be able to see what is on the way, and perhaps you will notify the others that certain works will soon be in their hands. On and by the way: there must be some new members of the Tribe by now, whom I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting; but it would not be fair to exclude them from the book hunt, and if you can collect their lists too and forward them to me, I will see what can be done for them also.

Now, the EPSI Library. I have been thinking about this as well. Your list of the books so far included in the Library must have been a great labour to compile, and you are to be congratulated upon it! It is marvellous to have a basis now from which to work. I have tidied up this list a little, re-arranged it alphabetically under author name (preserving your item numbers in case they are significant), and I have printed it out in its new format; I will send some copies over to Xiao Li, and maybe one of the copies can be placed in the Library itself. With this list to hand I have been able to consider which further publications might be most needed to fill gaps and to extend the range of the books already held, and I have ordered quite a few already, to be mailed over via Xiao Li; he will pass these on so that they can be added to your stock, and I will prepare and print out a new form of label that can be placed inside the front cover of each of them, to record their origin. In particular I was pleased to find copies of the original draft manuscripts of *The Waste Land*, for study in connection with my lectures which I gave at Zhongda, and these books have apparently already reached Xiao Li, which is good news. Other packets are on their way through the international mails, and I shall continue to choose and order more books as time goes by. If any of you want to suggest particular authors or topics which could be represented, outside your special areas of research, perhaps you could collect up any such suggestions (including any from Professor Ou Hong himself), so that I can widen the search and make good use of funds.

Well, enough for one letter. I really enjoy remembering my time with you all, even if I did sometimes find the heat rather too much, and such fine banquets we had! Truly South China cooking is some of the best in the world, and your wise guardian Professor Ou Hong knows how to choose good places. Of course he is following in the footsteps of the great teacher Dai Yu-ling, as I always remembered when I passed his statue in the entrance hall at Zhingda, but he is a most worthy successor and you are so lucky to have him with you. Here in my College we also have good dinners and good conversation; but maybe if there is ever to be another Poetry Conference beside the Pearl River I shall be able to meet you all again and put my chopsticks to work!

With all best wishes to you all:

Lao Pu