

A Letter: In Memory of Jeremy Prynne, and a Case Study of True Friendship Between China and the West¹

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Abstract

This commemorative essay serves a dual purpose: it pays heartfelt tribute to the distinguished British experimental poet Jeremy Prynne and records the long-term sincere cross-cultural friendship between the author and Prynne, which stands as a typical case of genuine communication between Chinese and Western intellectuals. Recounting over two decades of interactions starting from 2001, the text chronicles their weekly academic discussions at Cambridge, Prynne's visiting scholar experience at Guangzhou University, more than a thousand exchanged emails, and multiple supportive gestures Prynne offered the author—including a three-and-a-half-page recommendation letter, full backing for the memorial of Chinese poet Xu Zhimo at King's College, and his final consent to act as an advisor for the Chinese and European Association for Poetry and Poetics (CEAP) while seriously ill in bed. Beyond personal reminiscence, the essay reflects on a core obstacle to Sino-Western communication: insufficient literary reading and inadequate cultural immersion among language learners on both sides, which frequently trigger misunderstandings. To address this barrier, the author introduces his over-ten-year Modern English and Culture Education Program (MECEP), a reading-oriented teaching model proven effective in fostering cross-cultural linguistic and cultural competence. Rooted in the belief of shared humanity across civilizations, the author also shares his optimistic life outlook shaped by Prynne's sober reminders of global evils, and defines his professional mission as an English educator to bridge China and the world through literary exchange. This memoir illustrates how sustained literary dialogue can transcend national divisions and build lasting mutual trust.

Keywords: Jeremy Prynne, cross-cultural literary friendship, Sino-Western communication, MECEP, intercultural misunderstanding

Jeremy Prynne was a great poet. And even more important to me, he was a great friend.

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From January 2001 to January 2002, when I was a visiting scholar at Cambridge University, he met with me once a week to discuss my PhD thesis and related issues. Our meetings often lasted several hours. At my invitation, he served as an international expert at Guangzhou University from January to August of 2005, and during that time he spent many hours with me as well as my family and friends. We exchanged more than a thousand emails from the summer of 2000 to the summer of 2022, until he became too fragile to reply to our messages.

One of the most important letters Jeremy Prynne wrote on my behalf was a recommendation for a job in 2011. I had suggested that only around half a page was needed. Nevertheless, he took it very seriously, devoting quite a lot of time and energy on it. In fact, the letter he eventually delivered was three and a half pages long, presenting the best version of me. As a result, I was indeed offered the job, though I failed to actually take it because of some technical administrative issues.

I have reread some of his letters after his passing last month, and they are still very precious to me. The recommendation letter in particular is especially important to me, not only as a testimony of our close friendship, but also as solid evidence of a true friendship between China and England, and indeed, of China and the West in general. It is consoling to see how such a true friendship existed across national and ethnic boundaries, especially now when the world is so divided and suffering from so many evils.

I firmly believe all humans belong to one family, and we are all essentially the same despite our seemingly huge differences in culture, religion, politics and other aspects. I have always followed the principle that “honesty is the best policy”, both when I interacted with Jeremy and with others at home and abroad. Jeremy and I agreed a lot, although we did disagree sometimes, even quarreling occasionally. As we understood each other more, our friendship deepened, resulting in the friendship that is as true as any between my fellowmen and me.

To me it seems that many international problems, especially those between China and the West, occur partly because the people involved have not truly mastered the languages in which they communicate. Misunderstandings are often resulted, with sometimes harmful consequences. I have made many efforts to help promote better communication in the world, one of which was to establish the Modern English and Culture Education Program (MECEP) which I have run for more than 10 years. In this program, Chinese students are required to read as many novels in English as possible with help of my academic friends whose native tongue is English, and this has proven very successful. My own son, the first MECEP student, read more than sixty novels in English before he studied as an undergraduate at Cambridge, and to my knowledge he has never experienced any problems communicating in English, despite my warnings that he might encounter expressions and situations that are unknown or new.

I have learned that students in China who major in Western languages do not do enough reading in literary works in their target languages, and this is equally true of Westerners who study Chinese. It seems to be a worldwide problem, perhaps due to the educational systems in the various countries. Students are taught linguistic skills without being immersed in the cultural background, and that may be why international communication is so fraught with misunderstandings. I believe that programmes like MECEP provide a way out of this problem by helping students become deeply familiar with other cultural backgrounds through their wide reading of literary works with professional tutorship.

Although I would like to include more students in my program each year, my time and energy do not allow this at the moment. Hopefully, the methodology I have developed can help a larger number of people well master a second language, and help the world run a little more smoothly.

I am pretty optimistic though my life experience is tough. I have found that I share much mindset with the American transcendentalists who seem to be “too rosy” to a lot of people.

I understand there are dark sides of humanity, but I still choose to adopt a positive attitude to life. Jeremy Prynne was much more sophisticated than I was. He often reminded me of the evils in the world, and gave me advice on how to avoid or combat them. Our friendship provided me with a lot of spiritual strength during a very dark period in my life. Indeed, he helped me solve many problems and become more mature.

As a teacher of English in China, I have long understood that my professional mission is to bring the world together. One day, after a long discussion, Jeremy Prynne joked with me, saying: “Well, Mr. Li is going to bring peace to the world!”, to which I could only reply, “I will surely have a try!”

I made a lot of proposals to Jeremy Prynne that might seem ridiculous to him, and to my surprise, he would always give me support, so long as an idea does not go too far. In 2001, I suggested that King’s College establish a memorial for the Chinese poet Xu Zhimo, who is famous in China for his beautiful poems about Cambridge. Though my idea may have seemed unusual, he gave it his full support. The memorial was miraculously established in 2008, and it has now become a huge success, attracting many Chinese visitors to Cambridge and to King’s each year.

Indeed, Jeremy Prynne is a person who would always say “yes” to my requests. In May of 2025, I visited him in the company of Jane Gooder and Ian Hermes. Unfortunately, he was so fragile that he had to receive us while lying in bed. That day I invited him to serve as an advisor for CEAP (Chinese European Association for Poetry and Poetics), a new venture we had just started, and he agreed without hesitation. This was the last “yes” he said to me.

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