

J. H. Prynne and China: Over Forty Years of Academic Engagement and Poetic Dialogue

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Abstract

Jeremy H. Prynne, the preeminent British poet and leading figure of the Cambridge School of Poetry, enjoys an extensive body of work with far-reaching influence, and has maintained frequent exchanges with China's academic and poetic circles. As a contemporary representative of the Cambridge School, Prynne has exerted a profound impact on China's foreign language academia, particularly scholars engaged in the research on British. Besides delivering lectures at universities in Jiangsu, Guangdong, Hunan and other provinces, Prynne has kept extensive connections with avant-garde poets and helped promote Chinese avant-garde poetry onto the global stage. With a deep personal affinity for China, Prynne's four decades of academic engagement and poetic dialogue here exemplify his acute insight and profound erudition as a distinguished poet and literary critic, leaving a pivotal imprint on the research and teaching of British and American literature in the country.

Keywords: Cambridge School of Poetry, British and American literature, avant-garde poetry, academic engagement, poetic dialogue

Jeremy H. Prynne, the distinguished contemporary British poet and leading figure of the Cambridge School of Poetry, passed away on April 22, 2026, at age 89. Beginning in the 1960s, he published a total of 58 poetry collections encompassing roughly 700 poems, ranking him among Britain's most prolific contemporary poets with the longest sustained writing career.

The Daily Telegraph, a newspaper catering largely to Britain's conservative elite and established middle class, ran Mr. Prynne's obituary (Williamson, 2026) on the day of his death, describing him as an "erudite and enigmatic poet who became a cult figure to some readers and

Received 6 May 2026; revised 22 May 2026; accepted 4 June 2026.

Citation: Zhang, Y. (2026). J. H. Prynne and China: Over Forty Years of Academic Engagement and Poetic Dialogue. *Verse Version*, 15 (1), 13-24.

<https://doi.org/10.64699/26CWOY3175>

made others flinch,” and “perhaps the most learned poet since Milton.” While hailing Prynne as “Britain’s most exciting poet,” the newspaper nevertheless admitted his genius going unacknowledged. Such seemingly contradictory assessments however fit well Prynne’s oeuvre. This article is not in the position to judge Prynne’s voluminous poetic output and outstanding scholarly research; instead, it aims to map out his over forty years of academic exchanges and poetic interactions with China.

1. Sustaining the Legacy Between the Cambridge School and Chinese Academia

Mr. Prynne’s Chinese name “Pu Ling’en” was coined in the late 1980s by Xie Ming, his first Chinese doctoral student at Cambridge, now a professor at the University of Toronto. Prynne was happy with the name because two of its characters overlap with those of Pu Songling from Qing Dynasty, author of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. He was fond of the affectionate nickname “Lao Pu” (Old Pu) given by his Chinese friends and readily accepted it. As a pivotal contemporary inheritor of the Cambridge literary tradition, Prynne maintained close ties with China’s academic and poetic circles.

Cambridge University’s fame to Chinese literary scholars largely owes to I. A. Richards and his pupil William Empson’s teaching in China in 1920s-30s. As leading figures of the New Criticism, Richards with notions of practical criticism and close reading, and Empson with his theory of ambiguity, exerted an exceptionally far-reaching influence on Chinese academia. They mentored a cohort of distinguished scholars in foreign literature such as Li Funing, Zhou Jueliang and Wang Zuoliang, while some of their students from Southwest Associated University became prominent poets, like Mu Dan, Zheng Min, Yuan Kejia from the Nine Leaves School of Poetry.

First at Cambridge and later at Harvard University, I. A. Richards strove to systematize practical criticism into a rigorous, objective, and practicable critical framework. Known as close reading, this methodology became the core of the subsequent New Criticism school.

Practical criticism was highly popular within Cambridge's curriculum, with its own coursework and examinations for students. Prynne composed twenty-eight guidelines entitled "Tips on Practical Criticism" for English majors to cultivate evidence-based critical argumentation, a somewhat standardized mode of literary interpretation (Witt, n.d.). From my perspective, this approach resonates with the long-standing Chinese scholarly ethos of grounding every claim in verifiable evidence and reasoning from available facts.

Through his visits to China, Prynne sustained the academic dialogue between Cambridge and Chinese scholars in foreign literature. In a July 2012 interview with *Yangcheng Evening News*, Prynne recounted his early exposure to translated classical Chinese poetry and his fondness for its Eastern aesthetic. He said he later undertook research projects on Han-dynasty history, which led to his meeting Professor Dai Liuling from the School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University (Deng et al., 2012), and the two forged a profound lifelong friendship. Prynne contributed a critical introduction to the English translation of *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*, an anthology including Han-dynasty poetry. The book's first edition appeared in 1982, suggesting Prynne's acquaintance with the erudite sinologist Dai Liuling most likely dated back to the early 1980s. The timeline is corroborated by the exhibition of Hihistory of School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University 1924–2024: its section on international academic exchanges between 1980 and 1989 records that the two scholars began corresponding in the early 1980s over Ezra Pound and Chinese poetics, initiating collaboration between Sun Yat-sen University and Cambridge. At an academic conference convened to mark the 75th anniversary of the University of Hong Kong in 1986, Prof. Dai delivered a paper entitled "On Water Figures in Western and Chinese Literary Judgment," with Prynne as discussant. Their collaboration was facilitated ever since (Dai, 1986, pp. 151-162). As Prynne confirmed in the same newspaper interview with *Yangcheng Evening News*, his goodwill toward China was also shaped by Joseph Needham, his friend and colleague at Gonville and

Caius College, a giant figure of Chinese science and technology.

2. Cross-Century Scholarly Exchanges with Chinese Academia

Beginning with his teaching in China in the early 1990s, J. H. Prynne conducted academic work at universities across provinces of Jiangsu, Guangdong, and Hunan, etc., benefiting a large number of faculty and students. From March to April 1991, he taught at Suzhou Medical College (now the Medical College of Suzhou University), and was among the earliest top Western scholars to hold long-term teaching posts in China following the Reform and Opening-up. His devotion earned him a reward for foreign faculty in teaching, offered by the Jiangsu Provincial Education Commission (Ou, 2025, p. 435).

During his stay in Suzhou, Prynne engaged extensively with local academic communities. Professor Fan Boqun of Suzhou University, renowned in modern Chinese literature research, presided over Prynne's lectures and introduced him to top writers including Lu Wenfu, then Chairman of Jiangsu Writers' Association, and Gao Xiaosheng. They exchanged views on literature and regional culture, such as how Suzhou classical gardens and civic folk culture shaped local literature. Prynne also paid a visit to Professor Qian Zhonglian, an authority on classical Chinese literature and chief editor of *Records of Qing Poetry*. They discussed poetic composition in Han, Wei and the Six Dynasties alongside Western modern poetry, and Professor Qian presented him with a photocopy of his autographed poetry collection *Poems from Mengshao Studio*.

Furthermore, Prynne was active in literary events across Jiangsu. He attended the International Symposium on Contemporary Poetry hosted by Suzhou University in 1991, engaging in dialogue with Jiangsu-based writers and critics Ye Zhaoyan and Su Tong on Chinese context of postmodern poetry. In 1993, he delivered a lecture co-organized by Jiangsu Writers' Association and *Yuhua* Magazine, exploring narrative disparities between Chinese and Western poetry.

Prynne was highly appreciative of the Ming Dynasty's the Wu School of Painting and its master Shen Zhou. Prynne (Prynne, 2010a) maintained that Shen Zhou's painting "Night Vigil" and its attached colophon "Sitting through the Night" subverted the conventional hierarchy between painting and accompanying inscriptions; instead, the work embodied the Ming literati's spiritual pursuit of unity between mind and matter, as well as inner and outer worlds, standing as an exemplary manifestation of traditional Chinese literati painting and its meditative poetics. Prynne later selected Shen Zhou's painting "Night Vigil" as the cover artwork for the bilingual Chinese-English anthology *Selected Poems of J. H. Prynne*, edited by Professor Ou Hong.

Mr. Dai Liuling was a founding figure of foreign language and literature studies at Sun Yat-sen University and also across Guangdong Province. He recommended his doctoral student Ou Hong, the first recipient of doctor degree in English in P.R. China, to conduct postdoctoral research at the University of Cambridge from 1988 to 1990 under the supervision of Jeremy Prynne. Professor Ou Hong promoted academic collaboration with Prynne when he began to supervisor doctoral students, which action immensely benefited the students and also intensified Prynne's ties with Chinese scholarly community.

In 2005, Jeremy Prynne was appointed Guest Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University. In 2010, he became Advisor for the English Poetry Studies Institute (hereinafter referred to as "EPSI"), and also mentored the Institute's visiting scholars at Cambridge, including Li Zeng, Li Zhimin, Cao Shanke, Li Chengjian, Lei Yanni, Zhou Fang, Luo Bin and Zhao Kai. A Sinologist, Prynne regarded these young academics as Professor Ou's entrusted disciples and fostered their scholarly growth with meticulous tutoring. Li Zhimin, for instance, now Guangzhou Distinguished Scholar at Guangzhou University, regularly spent an afternoon every week to have face-to-face discussion with Professor Prynne during his Cambridge visiting fellowship (2001–2002), which experience seemed to him like another PhD

program. An eminent poet and former Librarian of Gonville and Caius College, University of Cambridge, Prynne donated a total of 811 volumes of books to EPSI and, with his expertise in library, making it a leading domestic resource hub for English poetry research. He stressed the importance of the books' accessibility to all researchers in need. Furthermore, seventeen letters from *Weixiantang Remaining Manuscripts* by Professor Ou Hong document the mentorship and scholarly friendship of Prof. Prynne.

Prynne also held a short-term teaching appointment at Guangzhou University and delivered several lectures, including his featured talk at the university's Overseas Expert Lecture Series in June 2015, where he shared firsthand perspectives on poetic composition and appreciation. He also maintained extensive ties with foreign literature scholars in Hunan Province as well. He lectured at Hunan Normal University, with scarce public documentation though. He attended the Second National Symposium on English Poetry hosted by Central South University in October 2010, where he delivered a keynote address entitled "What is a Classical Poem," and stayed for more time after the conference. Prynne's lectures at Central South University included talks on William Blake and Walt Whitman, delivered in May 2008 and November 2010 respectively, and were received with exceptional enthusiasm. An excerpt from a lecture report reads: "He integrates the holistic leanings of modernism with postmodern fragmentation and its rejection of unitary subjectivity into a cohesive whole. His poetry encapsulates the major twentieth-century poetic movements alongside their prevailing sensibilities and core intellectual frameworks, which secures him as a defining voice of twentieth-century poetry." (News web of Central South University)

For this visit to Central South University, Prynne opted to reside in a local residential neighborhood and invited graduate students to visit his lodgings for tutorial. The PhD and MA candidates took turns calling on him to seek academic guidance in return for which they treated the professor to dinners at virtually every nearby restaurant. The bold, fiery character of Hunan

cuisine proved to match the experimental, pioneering spirit of this avant-garde poet! On one occasion, comparing Chinese and British tutorial, Prynne quipped that British students acquire erudition steeped in their supervisors' pipe smoke whereas Chinese students grow amid the aroma of their tutors' meals: his stay this time served a convincing example.

3. Interactions with China's Avant-Garde Poets

Jeremy Prynne first met Che Qianzi and Zhou Yaping, core members of the Yuanyang (Original) poetry circle beside the Grand Canal in eastern Suzhou in 1991. This encounter initiated his long-standing friendship with avant-garde poet communities based in Suzhou and Nanjing. He collaborated with Professor Zhang Ziqing from Nanjing University and American scholar Jeff Twitchell (known among Chinese poets by the informal moniker "Zheng Xiucui", meaning "Scholar Zheng") to discuss linguistic experimentation and formalism, boosting experimental practices of China's avant-garde poetry.

Centered at Nanjing University, a group of young poets modeled their self-funded mimeographed independent poetry journal *Original: Chinese Language Poetry* after the influential French avant-garde periodical *Tel Quel*. The domestic Chinese print run ceased after only two issues (Issue 1, 1991; Issue 2, 1992). Nevertheless, the first issue of *Original*, translated into English by Jeff Twitchell and edited by Prynne, was issued in 1994 by Britain's Parataxis Press under the title *Original: Chinese Language Poetry*. A journal version *Parataxis: Modernism and Modern Writing* followed in the subsequent year, drawing attention from international poetry circles. In December 2002, the UK experimental poetry magazine *Jacket* published translated excerpts of *Original* in its 20th issue (available at jacketmagazine.com/20/pt-chinese.html). In his "Afterword," Prynne argued that the group's writings were rooted in the contemporary milieu of manifold contradictions and spiritual tensions, and meanwhile deeply anchored in long-standing tradition of the Chinese language. This observation underscores that the vitality of contemporary Chinese avant-garde poetry

stems from a perfect mixture of tradition and modernity.

The American Language School poets such as James Sherry and Hank Lazer were so expectant of China's experimental verse that they traveled to China for discussions with the Chinese peers. The local experimental poetry nonetheless received scant critical attention domestically before 2010, which became a transitional potion in the history of China's contemporary avant-garde poetry and cross-border poetic exchanges.

Prynne maintained close contact with Che Qianzi the active experimental poet in China. He facilitated the 2002 Cambridge publication of Che Qianzi's *Vegetarian Holding a Rooster: Nine Poems*, translated into English by Zheng Zhen and Jeff Twitchell via Barker Press in Cambridge, and published articles to promote the collection. Yunte Huang, a Chinese-American scholar from the University of California, Santa Barbara, proposes the notion of "No Poetry" in his English translation anthology of Che Qianzi's poems (Che, 2019). He situates Che Qianzi within a transcultural avant-garde genealogy encompassing the French *Tel Quel* group, American Language Poetry and Jeremy Prynne, examining how the poet's Suzhou regional sensibility merges with his experimental avant-garde qualities. Prynne and Che Qianzi maintained decades of intellectual rapport, sharing affinities in poetic philosophy. As documented by Zhaoming Qian (2022), Prynne borrows from and rewrites Che Qianzi's poetic lines in his own writing, crafting cross-linguistic readymade artistic dialogue. This shows reciprocity of Prynne and contemporary Chinese pioneering poetry.

Jeremy Prynne attended the two Pearl River international poetry conferences hosted in Guangzhou in 2005 and 2008, where he delivered keynote addresses. "Poetic Thought" (Prynne, 2010b), his keynote speech presented at the second conference, for instance, elaborated on how to discern poetic thought from poetry's formal properties. It distinguished thought, thinking and intellectuality, and examined their functions regarding poets and readers, with particular focus on language as foundation and substance of poetic thought. Thanks to his

persistent inquiry on and formal experiment in poetic composition, Prynne never failed to exert influence onto Chinese avant-garde poets. Also in attendance at the two Pearl River poetry conferences were Beijing-based poets Che Qianzi (who had long settled in the capital city), Pan Xichen, Gao Xing and Shu Cai, alongside Huang Lihai, Dong Dangzi, Lu Weiping and other poets from the Guangzhou vicinity.

In the above-mentioned interview with *Yangcheng Evening News*, Prynne specified that he began writing poetry as a teenager, read translated classical Chinese poetry and admired its Oriental flavor, and later developed an abiding interest in Chinese history of the Han Dynasty. His encounter with *New Songs from the Jade Terrace* (*Yutai Xinyong*) was thus only natural: the earliest extant Chinese anthology focused on boudoir and amorous verse, with poems ranging from the Han and Wei dynasties through the Liang Dynasty and epitomizing traits of palace-style poetry. Prynne (1987) contributed a preface for the English translation of *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, a testament to his familiarity with and fondness for the anthology.

4. The Sinicised Jeremy Prynne

“That Room in Cambridge,” an essay written by Emily Witt, one of Prynne’s former students at the University of Cambridge, cites him thus: “only two countries with well-formed poetic traditions were England and China, though China’s was far better established, and that Prynne considered American poetry to be rudimentary and infantile in comparison.” (Witt, n.d.) Prynne had such seemingly blunt, unsparing remarks! This can only be understood in association with his profound admiration for Chinese culture and civilization.

When Alexander Mercouris, a senior British political commentator and analyst from a distinguished Greco-British political lineage, was inspired by his partner Catherine Brown (once student of Prynne) speaking of her former tutor, he composed a biographical sketch “Jeremy Prynne in China.” (Brown, n.d.) In Mercouris’ imagination, Prynne lived during China’s prosperous Northern Song Dynasty, an era marked by flourishing Chinese civilisation

when literati-officials combined scholarly, bureaucratic and literary roles, dedicated themselves to the state, cultivated refined tastes and commanded widespread respect. The “Chinese Prynne” was from a middle-class household near Mount Tai, close to Confucius’ hometown. He passed the imperial civil-service examinations with distinction at an early age. Erudite across scholarly and artistic disciplines, upright and law-abiding, free-spirited, he rose to high official position before retiring from public life to devote himself to teaching. This allegorical biographical vignette casts Prynne as the epitome of China’s traditional literatus, embodying his ideal persona.

A blog post “The Anomaly of J. H. Prynne” (Rickard, n.d.) draws on Mao Zedong’s *On Contradiction*, alongside Friedrich Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* and Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, to argue that Prynne transforms philosophical contradiction into immanent poetic heterogeneity within his poetic composition. As a matter of fact, Rickard’s article starts from analyzing Prynne’s lecture in a university which is close to Mao’s former residence, and this signals Prynne’s profound reverence for the great Chinese leader. During his stays in China, Prynne regularly pinned a Mao badge on the jacket, also a sign of his tribute to Mao. While lecturing at Central South University, Prynne resided along Xinmin Road, close to the west bank of the Xiang River. On one occasion heading out for dinner, he suggested dining at what he dubbed the “Cultural Revolution Restaurant” which turned out to be a restaurant styled after a “People’s Commune Canteen,” whose abundant red-themed decor inspired his fanciful naming. I once accompanied Professor Prynne and Professor Ou Hong on a trip to Mao Zedong’s former residence in Shaoshan. When they disagreed over the proper English terminology of a farming tool on display, Prynne borrowed my mobile phone and made a call to his colleague back in Cambridge, a scholar in history of Chinese science and technology. The pursuit of precision must have involved Mr. Prynne’s tribute to Chairman Mao.

J. H. Prynne began publishing poetry in the 1960s and quickly earned renown among

independent and avant-garde poets, yet he has hardly secured widespread acclaim within mainstream academia. He chose to remain on the literary margins mostly owing to his radical experimentalism; his big number of poetry collections were accordingly by independent presses. Often dismissed as willfully obscure and kept at arm's length by readers, Prynne never shuns the notoriety of difficulty which instead became his topic of discussion. His keynote address (Prynne, 2008) at the First National Symposium on English Poetry, as a matter of fact, bore the title "On the Difficulty of Translating 'Difficult' Poetry." The ambiguity inherited from his Cambridge predecessor William Empson constitutes a major obstacle to interpreting and translating his work, and the lecture served as a firsthand illustration of difficulties to approach his poetic composition and its translation. His writings alienate casual readers due to poetics of obscurity, nonetheless, "for those who were attempting to establish in England, for the first time since the modernists, a coherent and enduring practice of poetry, Prynne's writing was and remains exemplary" (poetryfoundation.org, n.d.).

Prynne is at times compared to Ezra Pound and both made notable contributions to English poetry (Mellors, 2005). Chinese poetry and Chinese civilization served as a wellspring of their inspiration: these influences enabled Pound to found Imagist poetry and compose masterpieces including *The Cantos*. Prynne, for his part, has his own poetry published in English-English edition, visited China and stayed considerably long time for academic exchange. Over forty years of exchanges and interactions with China's academic and poetic circles, Prynne has carried forward the scholarly legacy between the Cambridge School and Chinese academia. Besides, he has helped introduce China's contemporary Language Poetry and experimental verse to the global stage, amplifying the international voice of Chinese poetry.

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