



The Lost Poems of Cangjie

John Briscoe

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The Lost Poems of Cangjie is a unique and beautiful poetry collection wrapped in intriguing historical myth and mystery.

The Lost Poems of Cangjie is equal parts poetry and historical mystery. The volume purports to be the first translation of the newly discovered poems of the legendary Cangjie, the creator of the Chinese writing system, who lived more than four millennia ago.

The volume begins with a foreword by John Briscoe. During a trip to East Asia, Briscoe says he encountered a mysterious translator, E. O., who entrusted him with the work of bringing the poems to publication. E. O. contributes the afterword, which explains, with intentional vagueness, how the poems came to be discovered inside one of the famed terra cotta warriors of China's first emperor.

The poems themselves are in two sections, the Beta Scroll and the Alpha Scroll. The Beta Scroll contains poems by The Sculptor, who encountered Cangjie's poems 2,400 years after they were written, and who was their original translator. The Alpha Scroll contains Cangjie's works, supposedly written in 2650 BCE during the reign of the Yellow Emperor, the mytho-historical figure considered to be one of the originators of Chinese culture.

Poems in both sections bear striking resemblance to one another—fitting, perhaps, considering that the author of the Beta Scroll is said to be the translator of the Alpha, and both have been translated into English by E. O.

All of the poems in the collection are brief and lovely, ripe with simple imagery and a musical lyricism that makes them highly readable:

*White spires,
or lavender petals
of wisteria blooms in spring—
or was it eyes he saw in a moon, or a moon
[—in eyes?—]*

The image of the moon returns again and again throughout the text, showing up later in the Alpha Scroll as a tormenting symbol that “winks / and taunts.”

Cangjie's Alpha Scroll poems are filled with sympathetic longing. He writes for a love that he cannot possess, a courtesan of the Yellow Emperor whom he has been forbidden to speak to. The poems bear her image again and again, though it is uncertain whether Cangjie is truly seeing her or merely feeling the loss of her in lines like “Your chestnut eyes, nearly still, / follow the darting flight / of a bird I cannot see.”

The work as a whole—the foreword, scrolls, and afterword—combines to create a mystery that is interesting but, for the most part, implausible. A great degree of credulity is needed to believe that such a historical discovery could have

been made without greater publicity.

Though the afterword brings together numerous historical events and figures—and provides an account of the discovery of the scrolls that is lyrical in its own right—Wikipedia is used as a source in more than one footnote, which detracts from the scholarly ethos of this part of the text.

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MARGARET FEDDER (November 8, 2017)

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